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PRESBYTERIAN PIRATE

*A Portrait of Stevenson*



# PRESBYTERIAN PIRATE

*A PORTRAIT OF STEVENSON*

By DORIS N. DALGLISH

*The level of the parlour floor  
Was honest, homely, Scottish shore ;  
But when we climbed upon a chair,  
Behold the gorgeous East was there !  
Be this a fable.*

R. L. S.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

LONDON · NEW YORK · TORONTO

1937

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
AMEN HOUSE, E.C. 4  
London Edinburgh Glasgow New York  
Toronto Melbourne Capetown Bombay  
Calcutta Madras  
HUMPHREY MILFORD  
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY

PRINTED IN ~~ENGLAND~~ GREAT BRITAIN

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## CHAPTER I

### THE AUTHOR AND HER HERO

'For indeed I loved the man, and do honour his memory this side idolatry as much as any. . . . There was ever more in him to be praised than pardoned.'

BEN JONSON.

*Queen:* The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

*Hamlet:* Oh, but she'll keep her word.

A WEEK after I began to put the notes for this book finally into shape, I crossed the Firth of Clyde in the late, fast-gathering dusk of a September evening. The lamps were lit along familiar roads and I could mark their order; and there were lights of the sea also. North of the steamer shone the single yellow flash from the Cloch; opposite that was Dunoon where the 'drunken Highland sibyl' made her prophecy that Stevenson would 'be very happy, visit America and be much upon the sea'. Between Dunoon and our steamer the Toward light revolved unceasingly, a shred of gold suddenly bursting into a full ray: and down on the southern horizon the double white flash from Little Cumbræ (a light whose building was supervised by the great Robert Stevenson himself as a boy of nineteen) stabbed up every two minutes into the growing darkness. This was the most remarkable light of the group, for it is the last that the 'gangrel Scot' sees, if he leaves his country from the Clyde, before passing into the more open spaces of the Firth, leaving behind, if he be from the Glasgow area, the coast towns with all their holiday memories and, behind the thinnest veneer of amenity, all that rather squalid homeliness which proves that the Scot is nearer the barbarian than the Englishman is.

I looked at the lights. Naturally I recalled the obvious lines.

Say not of me that weakly I declined  
The labours of my sires and fled the sea,  
The towers we founded and the lamps we lit,  
To play at home with paper like a child.

And I said to myself that in another fifteen years Scotland will have the chance of showing something of what is in her when the centenary of Stevenson's birth is celebrated. What sort of a Scotland it will be, how governed and administered, which will then, with characteristic sentimentality and the national devotion to fine phrases, do homage to the greatest man of letters she has ever produced, it is not my business to inquire. No political happenings, no nationalistic cultural movements, could obscure the fact or, I think, to do her justice, ever make her underestimate him. There will probably be more danger of vain hyperbole in 1950 than of 'debunking', and rightly so, since Scotland will then be considering the achievements of her greatest essayist, the greatest of her poets writing in English, her one writer of enjoyable letters and the author of the novel which, albeit unfinished, is by far her greatest as well as being one of the greatest in the English language. The English reader will hardly credit with what weighings and deliberation, what searchings of any artistic and national conscience that I may possess, what furtive glances towards the past, each of those superlatives has been chosen and written down. It must also be remarked that I have not spoken of him as the greatest Scottish novelist, but as the author of the greatest Scottish novel. I believe the expressions are synonymous, but let those who find delight or believe they find literature in the novels of Mr. Priestley and Mr. Cronin, continue to read the *Waverleys*, while others pray for some event which shall reveal their own

poverty of thought to critics who declare that in *Weir of Hermiston* Stevenson at last, or for once, 'touched Scott'. Earthquakes may be said to 'touch' their victims, and so do glaciers, and so does genius touch what is less than genius. Those critics must be sadly shocked whenever they read his cavalier reference to Sir Walter in *A Gossip on Romance*:

'As his books are play to the reader, so were they play to him. He conjured up the romantic with delight, but he had hardly patience to describe it. He was a great day-dreamer, a seer of fit and beautiful and humorous visions, but hardly a great artist; hardly, in the manful sense, an artist at all. He pleased himself, and so he pleases us. Of the pleasures of his art he tasted fully; but of its toils and vigils and distresses never man knew less. A great romantic—an idle child.'

This rounding-off of a century seems comically, yet painfully, irrelevant when we connect it with Louis Stevenson. The consummation of a hundred years, a placid number, self-contained and meaningless, suddenly has power to hurt us cruelly. Its suggestion of old age links itself incongruously with his name, for we cannot imagine him as aged. One hardly knows which passages in his letters are more moving, those in which as a boy he looks forward to that old age which he was never to see, or those in which the man, with a short space only of life remaining, protests that he was not made for anything but youth.

'O! how I enjoy it, and how I *shall* enjoy it afterwards (please God), if I get years enough allotted to me for the thing to ripen in. When I am a very old and very respectable citizen with white hair and bland manners and a gold watch, I shall hear three crows cawing in my heart, as I heard them this morning; I vote for old age and eighty years of retrospect. Yet, after all, I dare say, a short shrift and a nice green grave are about as desirable.'

'Eh! when we are old (if we ever should be) that too will be one of those cherished memories I have been so rhapsodizing over. We must consecrate our room. We must make it a

museum of bright recollections; so that we may go back there white-headed, and say "Vixi".

So he wrote when he was twenty-one. Nine months before his death he was writing:

'I have no taste for old age, and my nose is to be rubbed in it in spite of my face. I was meant to die young, and the gods do not love me;'

and six months later:

'I have been so long waiting for death, I have unwrapped my thoughts from about life so long, that I have not a filament left to hold by; I have done my fiddling so long under Vesuvius, that I have almost forgotten to play, and can only wait for the eruption, and think it long of coming. Literally, no man has more wholly outlived life than I. And still it's good fun.'

Finally, in the letter to Edmund Gosse written two days before his death, there comes again the cry, 'I was not born for age'. He elaborates a comparison between himself and his correspondent.

'You have a family growing up around you, and I am a childless, rather bitter, very clear-eyed, blighted youth. I have, in fact, lost the youth that makes it easy and natural for you to descend the hill. I am going at it straight. And where I have to go down it is a precipice.'

The precipice was terribly near.

So it is indeed an incongruity, this centenary business applied to such as die young. We feel that, for his own part, the first reaction would be the mocking glance—some called it unhuman—which some portraits detect in the wonderful eyes; then a flash of Scottish conceit and pride in his own success, followed by a moralizing on the fact that after all he had not let down the family who built Scotland's lighthouses. And finally, though the feeling would probably not clothe itself in the actual words of

Dunbar, we may be sure his essential melancholy would have recalled how

Onto the ded gois all Estatis,  
Princis, Prelotis and Potestatis,  
Baith riche and pur of all degre,  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

Let us consider the names of others, richly gifted as artists and thinkers, who at various times died young; Charles Sorley, killed in action at twenty; or such Victorian figures as Arnold Toynbee and Oliver Madox Brown; or Keats, or Shelley. When we repeat the name of Charles Sorley, particularly if we belong to his generation, a kind of constriction passes over our whole physical being as though we had been tortured; and when we try to speak we are painfully dumb. For we feel that it ought to have been possible to prevent his death. We forget that even the wickedness of history cannot destroy what is fine.

He died through the sin of man, and civilized society was not only 'consenting unto his death' but was sparing no pains to ensure that the same fate should come to thousands. That is why we mourn.

And Arnold Toynbee; for such an inspiration to countless pieces of idealistic service, we mourn in yet another fashion. He seems less an individual than a bright personification of the lost enthusiasms of a particular epoch.

Oliver Madox Brown (born five years after Stevenson) appears as a strange figure invested with a weird magic. Our sorrow is for the father, whose sonnet we read, and for the whole Pre-Raphaelite group affectionately regarding the boy as a spiritual son ready to carry on their particular torch. And Keats and Shelley; awed by the amount of their achievement, we wonder if personal regret for the individual life may not here be the supreme impertinence. But when we consider Stevenson, in comparison with any

one of these a man of mature years, we seem to be far more conscious that we are lamenting the death of a spirit, of a temper, of youth itself. More than youth had been denied to these others, but we think more insistently on what was lost to later years. What hurts us is the fact that Charles Sorley is not with us to-day to write poems full of truth and nobility, not so much the fact that he was killed. Stevenson, on the other hand, had passed, physically, beyond youth, had crammed too much into a restless life and had reached, at last, the perfection of his art; but it is his youth that we deplore, and it is those delights which he can so signally give to youth which we are conscious of having lost. It is not his death, even in the exile's circumstances of heightened sadness which makes us wince before our common doom. I think it is the death, while he lived, of his own youth which is the tragedy; and, irrevocably bound up with that, the death of our own youth also. For every true Stevensonian has at some time in his youth, under the pressure of the most superficial conflict with age, authority, or convention, recklessly identified himself with his Louis, or thought of him with a pang of happiness when remarking some feature of tragedy or mirth in the human crowd.

Even those industrious embroiderers of eulogy, Sidney Colvin and Graham Balfour, since they happened to be dealing with an unusually fine spirit, did occasionally display penetration. The former, in his testimonial written for that pathetically incongruous conflict, the candidature for the Edinburgh history chair, from which the loyal Stevensonian always has to avert his eyes because he cannot bear to see his friend discomfited, spoke of his friend as being 'by temperament and character . . . made to influence and attract growing minds'. Graham Balfour, on the last page of his *Life*, finally arrives at the truth in the remark

that his cousin's is one of the names which 'linger on the lips of men, being, as it were, a breeze blowing off the shores of youth'. A greater part of his strength than perhaps we suspect lies in his appeal to youth; not, of course, the Peter-Panish, affectedly 'boyish' appeal of *Treasure Island*, but the thrill conveyed by his letters and essays to adolescence, and the help which he was always ready to afford it in its struggles towards emancipation. No one who has not begun to care for him in youth is likely to begin to do so in later life. Youth, however, has been emancipated on such a gigantic scale that it is not seeking his sympathy. In the days when I first began to reckon myself a Stevensonian, the revolt of youth was being expressed in plays, whether earnest and prosaic like *The Younger Generation* or clever like *Fanny's First Play*, whose ridicule, bringing no constructive help, made a merely partial appeal to the young. Stanley Houghton was more satisfying, but even he did not positively woo us by charm to rebellion, as did the unhappy, loquacious boy in Heriot Row with whom one would gladly identify oneself. But now—youth has not much left to fight for. A figure symbolic of the new generation would be that of a girl, hideous in trousers, cycling on Sunday past a church which her parents do not compel her to attend because they have themselves gone out in the car; and perhaps her grandmother, who is coming to tea later on, will have short hair and a cigarette. Doubtless in dark places here and there youth is still crying out for freedom and independence and sympathy, but some part of Stevenson's appeal to youth may necessarily wane as youth wins one privilege after another. We are far from the epoch in which he could impishly reduce a girl visitor to his home to confusion and misery by forcing her to confess, at the dinner-table, that her surname was one of the Gaelic terms for the devil.

If all the cold water which well-meaning friends threw, or at least sprinkled, on my first proposals to write a study of Stevenson could be collected, it would doubtless serve to quench a flame of much stronger purpose and desire and to lay me, project and all, full fathom five. One suggestion was that, if I must write about some Scottish literary figure, I might be more useful to readers if I chose Dr. John Brown or Galt; but both of these estimable writers I judged to be too remote from the circumstances of to-day. We who were infants when Stevenson died, whose youth was lost in 1914 when he had been but twenty years dead, have lived and developed and experienced the maturing of our own literary judgements during those very years in which his reputation has deplorably waned. Those fluctuations and revolts of public taste which have done him an ill-service have directly helped to form our minds. We can speak of these matters with some authority, not merely as an audience passive before the utterance of dogmas by one or two previous generations of critics.

But the impulse which was driving me was not severely and purely aesthetic. It partook—it still partakes—of the foolish nature of nationalism, whose outcome is an aching heart, an unhealthy interest in battles long ago, a confused head, and sometimes trouble at Geneva and the sound of machine-guns.

All round me books by and about Scots were bursting from the press. Some were about the slums of Glasgow, and some were about the empty glens, and some were about the hypocrisy of many places, and some were about social credit and Whitehall and unemployment. The authors were groaning and rhapsodizing, drinking and tearing the tartan with a will, and who would not long to join in the fun? Some, in dealing with our literature, saw it as beginning with Burns, and some as with Dunbar, and



some thought it had begun again with Hugh MacDiarmid; but I looked in vain for any constructive appreciation of Stevenson. Suddenly I realized that when I first read him (I except a childish acquaintance with songs from *A Child's Garden*) it was less than twenty years since his death; and now it was twenty years from the outbreak of the War. Thus did events and one's own growing-up fall strangely into perspective. It was a quarter of a century since I read *An Inland Voyage*. Who reads it now? If no one was reading it, why? Was there anything that I could do about it? If I wanted to write something for Scotland, would it not be as useful to record my gratitude to a great national artist about whom I do know something as to lament about deer-forests in Sutherland which I have never seen or scoff at a kirk to which I do not belong? The more, therefore, I was discouraged, whether by those who cared for literature (this was hard to bear) or by those who did not (this was merely boring), the faster, being thrwn, I hastened towards the attempt. Nor shall I omit to point out the unhappiness of discussion with those who thought I was right in planning the book, but quite wrong about Henley, or Scottishness, or what not. Incidentally, I had never been conscious of much affection for John Galt himself, worthy man; and in this harsh world, especially when war has devastated the surroundings of one's youth and peace is devastating the middle years of life, there is much to be said for pausing to cultivate that sense of reality which springs from affection and from affection only. Not merely an author to criticize, not even merely a Scots author was my quest, but the study of an author regarded with the unfashionable regard of love.

The modern neglect of Stevenson may, and must, disturb lovers of literature in all countries, but to the Scot it means something more than a change of opinion about

books; it means that for lack of thought, light is being obscured and endangered which was precariously enclosed during a short life in a human personality nourished on those irrational prejudices and habits, possibly dangerous, certainly beloved, which went to the making of any other Scot. Inevitably this means danger. A song or a phrase, the picture of a ruined castle, the anniversary of a battle, may influence passions that mock at serious criticism; but where this influence is better exerted it adds to the enjoyment of art a radiance, an intensity, a truthfulness which the alien can never know.

Although enthusiasms are frequent at seventeen, what I experienced on then discovering *Weir of Hermiston* was an emotion so satisfying that if I could but once recapture it, I might be content. Already, thanks to one of the most inspiring teachers who ever gave an English lesson, I was pretty well grounded in Stevenson. I had been the 'sedulous ape' to the extent of assisting at many forced marriages between nouns and adjectives who met with some look of surprise. This mimicry had borne fruit in my first contribution to the school magazine where I persistently scattered such adjectives as 'brave' and 'hopeful', only to see them deleted. If I may anticipate, I have gathered that it also helped Providence to extend my sojourn in Oxford considerably longer than a few days of scholarship-hunting. What would I not give now to read that essay on the uses of ceremonial, in which I dwelt with unction on the eternal values of the pageantry annually practised at Holyrood during the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. There is a very feast of irony in the spectacle of Stevenson regarded as a passport to Oxford. Race cannot be eliminated even in the pursuit of knowledge, and if even a Scottish philosopher must remain for ever alien to Oxford's reduction of the absolute to a cricket-field, its tranquil

pleasantries and imperturbable aloofness and its peculiar silliness, which must exasperate the northerner, to how remote a wilderness must a literary romantic withdraw? The gentlemanly religion of an environment which is stirred only occasionally to the production of bigoted saints, a Wesley or a Pusey, a Newman or a Frank Weston, bears little trace of life to the vehement gaze of a fighting Presbyterian. To one who, like Stevenson, adjusts a Presbyterian habit of mind to an artistic technique, the spiritual life of Oxford must appear even more a compromise.

If I may again digress, two years later I won my first prize for an essay in a *Saturday Westminster* competition with a piece of writing which I had proudly hoped to be a skilful imitation of that style which was becoming for me very nearly the only style in the world. The adjudicator unfortunately, though not unreasonably, labelled it as a 'not very good' imitation of Sir Thomas Browne.

But to return to *Weir*. Here was something very different from travel books and rather unusual essays. It was late in the summer, during a holiday at Dumfries; darkness fell an hour earlier than, towards the end of August, and the evening was cloudy from the beginning. I could not stop reading. I went on and on, enraptured, 'all a wonder and a wild desire'. Never had I read anything like this in my life before; and when my eager race was checked by that cruel barrier of incompleteness, and the final sentence broke off and the eternal silence had fallen, what dread there might have been in the moment was lost in its beauty. I had experienced a supreme aesthetic emotion, I had received what art and love alone can give, and I was enriched for ever. Reading it had not moved me to tears, as it can now move me, for I knew little about life and less than I now know about art and about Stevenson; but I had found one

of the books which yield more and more to us as we grow older, whose appeal does not pass with our youth. Personally, I believe we rarely change our minds about books first admired in what Stevenson called 'the years for reading'—twenty to twenty-three, or even earlier. Temporary loyalties seem more probable a little later than that. The dead man had given to me lavishly; as his friend said of him in life, it was his generous way to give 'a hundred oxen for nine'.

Perhaps without fully realizing it, I felt him nearer than I have ever felt him since. Even in the following year, when I was able to be photographed on the doorstep of 17 Heriot Row, fortunately then empty, I do not think I can have achieved a purer happiness. I shall be content if my imperfect analysis of the causes of my gratitude to him may help to commemorate him among all who love great writing, and most particularly—if there be any need—among his fellow countrymen, who are mine.

It is best to be frank from the beginning, to confess that I have written with an eye to the true Stevensonian, the reader who could triumphantly answer the following examination paper:

1. What is the chief end of man?
2. Who were Coolin and Bogue?
3. What poet describes which of Stevenson's ancestors as 'opening out', and what did he open?
4. 'I was only happy once, that was at ——.' Fill in the blank.
5. What metrical psalm is sung to the tune *St. George's, Edinburgh*?
6. Where was the late Miss McGregor's cottage?
7. Who introduced Stevenson and Henley, and what did he (the introducer) edit?
8. Who was 'good-looking, delicate, Oxfordish'?
9. Where did Stevenson meet  
     Eleven English parsons, all  
     Entirely inoffensive?

10. What is a W.S., and which of Stevenson's friends was one of them?

If, for example, you think that the name Ferguson is, in Edinburgh, to be associated merely with confectionery, you are doubly wrong, both in spelling and in the history of Scottish poetry; and if you are at all vague about the personalities of Fleeming Jenkin and 'Bob' Stevenson and Mrs. Sitwell, it is no use concealing the fact that you had better first study the events of our author's life. For in dealing with one so eagerly communicative, vibrating with personality, incessantly speaking of himself as rare minds have every right to speak, it would be futile to attempt a cold and abstract valuation of his writings without using the life and letters as a glossary. No other Scottish writer has left letters to compare with his, letters which without hesitation may be placed alongside those of Keats, since both authors are enabled, by the strength of personal affection, to lift their inarticulate readers to their own height, surprising them into a comprehension they were not aware of possessing. From that height, in such company, we look over a wide prospect of the creation and are amazed at the wisdom which, because we love the guide, we appear to have suddenly inherited.

I fear that to some readers the comparison with Keats may seem almost frivolous, but I am prepared to defend it. Take into account the essential difference in racial temperament (What, for example, did the Church of his country matter to Keats? What has it mattered to most English poets?), and the fact that Keats's very homelessness (united, as it was, to the liberating power of deep love for brothers and sisters, which Stevenson could not know) made him, at an early age, a free man, untrammelled by over-anxious and distractedly loving parents. It is not the young philosophy of Keats which then seems less wonderful, but that

of Stevenson which appeals the more. And if, however unsuccessfully, we have ever written, here from Stevenson particularly, as his versatile pen left no form of imaginative composition untouched, we derive such encouragement for our most ridiculous attempts, so strong a sense of fellowship over the effort to produce 'my damned literature', such sympathy in the depression that would make it all seem so much waste of energy, as well as in the pleasure which makes it seem almost too much a matter of play in a tragic world, that our debt to him remains incalculable. With no trace of condescension he invites us, on the strength of our most insignificant achievement, to join him as craftsmen.

'When matter crowds upon him and words are not wanting—in what a continual series of small successes time flows by; with what a sense of power as of one moving mountains, he marshals his petty characters; with what pleasure, both of the ear and eye, he sees his airy structure growing on the page; and how he labours in a craft to which the whole material of his life is tributary, and which opens a door to all his taste, his loves, his hatreds, and his convictions.'

An attempt at some critical re-valuation of Stevenson as artist is far more urgently needed than any re-telling of his life. I have therefore assumed that the crowded events and perpetual travel of his comparatively few years are already well known to readers and that they have for themselves already made the circuitous journey over land and sea from Edinburgh to Samoa. Incidentally, I wonder if those perpetual journeyings have enhanced a little the Stevenson legend, providing stay-at-homes with the excitement of travel? Most of our writers are sedentary creatures, planted about in universities or country cottages, blending nicely with their environment. But as we read the life of Stevenson we seem to be always assisting at arrivals or depar-

tures, from the moment when the solitary boy, looking terribly ill, rather shy, but capable of enthralling talk, arrives in the hotel at Mentone, to the day when the novelist with an English reputation and an American halo makes the final arrival at Samoa. There is no risk of domestic monotony when we seem to be for ever sharing the experience of those who made the first easy contact with him in some new quarters, or feeling that 'parting is . . . all we need of hell' when finally the caravan moves on again, its leader waving good-bye and calling back in a Scottish voice some last absurd phrase. The outward events, especially those so clearly remembered from childhood and youth, cohere with the writings with such unusual intimacy, that I have from the beginning assumed this familiarity; for no one who had been genuinely impressed by the books could have hesitated to explore every available additional revelation of the personality therein so frankly evident. For those who can face a prolonged wallow in eulogy, the life by Graham Balfour remains the standard work and should be read in conjunction with the letters, although it calls for courage to sink down with Sidney Colvin into the clinging superlatives with which he upholsters one section of correspondence after another, his sober nature apparently dazzled into a generous rejection of all critical standards.

Nevertheless, the personal devotion which strikes us so forcibly as belonging to another generation, is a fine thing.

With a light word, he took  
The hearts of men in thrall,  
And with a golden look  
Welcomed them, at his call  
Giving their love, their strength,  
their all.

That is not the language which will ever be used of any

of those outstanding figures of to-day who are called literary and loom larger in the popular eye than true artists, although so perilously have barriers broken down that most of them are busy writing what has no claim whatsoever to be called literature. They do not seek, and they certainly will never receive affection. To offer one's love, one's strength, one's all, to Mr. Shaw or Mr. Wells would be as embarrassing to ourselves as it would be exasperating to the recipients; and as for the true artists, Mr. Eliot hardly commands devotion and would disapprove if he did, while Mr. Huxley will have to undergo a metamorphosis before he fails to command it. Pessimism and destructive criticism do not readily provoke hero-worship; and when that old-fashioned and indecently enthusiastic emotion does appear in this generation (as it fortunately did appear in Mr. Forster's fine life of Lowes Dickinson) the form which it sometimes takes is so menacing to art and truth and peace of mind that we are thankful that Stevensonians have never, even over the question of Henley, been as troublesome to society as the followers of D. H. Lawrence. Although not without vanity, Stevenson would have repudiated the too unfaltering panegyric. 'To equip a dull, respectable person with wings', he wrote, 'would be but to make a parody of an angel', and it was exactly this hint of parody which roused Henley's fury when he beheld wings being provided for one who was never for a moment dull and sincerely tried to avoid respectability, 'the greatest gag and wet-blanket ever laid upon men'.

I am not concerned with the Sabbath observance of Edinburgh in the '70's, or with its underworld, or the letters to *The Times*, or Samoan politics. I shall not even try to unravel the strains of an heredity that was rich and complex. I am not even concerned with Henley's article in the *Pall Mall*, although I hope and believe that many



readers of a later generation will entirely agree with it. No intelligent reader of Graham Balfour's book can fail to agree with Henley that it presents 'a seraph in chocolate, a barley-sugar effigy of a real man' and the reaction must have been unimaginably bitter to one who could add, 'not if I can help it shall this faultless or very nearly faultless monster go down to after years as the Lewis<sup>1</sup> I knew and loved and laboured with and for'. Henley was no fool, and I believe that he was right. The 'unmarried and irresponsible Lewis, the friend, the comrade, the *charmeur*', was the real Stevenson, and the young man who was slowly maturing all through the '70's (although from the first he was old in many respects) had in him the makings of a writer who never truly came to his own afterwards, though he died leaving unfinished a book which his younger self would have been proud to dream of. That fatal journey of 1879, the privations and unhappiness and despair and poverty of the time in America, the illness there which turned a constitutional fragility into inescapable invalidism, all these stand as a grim barrier across the road along which the young man who played at being an advocate and brought to Henley in hospital 'big yellow books quite impudently French' had been hopefully travelling. And across the barrier, won at so heavy a price, lay a married life which Henley instinctively understood would curtail the scope of his friend's genius, a life which was not what some essential and hidden self in Stevenson would sincerely have chosen, for his was a temperament largely incapable of adapting itself to a permanent basis of domestic passion.

Out of the dear and stormy and vital past, Henley could

<sup>1</sup> Henley's spelling. He, at least, was consistent. But even two letters make a difference. As a Scots friend of mine remarked after reading *The Constant Nymph*, 'A name like Lewis Dodd raises expectations of moral responsibility. It is almost Presbyterian.'

hear the voice of the young man who dedicated to him a volume of essays containing innumerable statements of such doctrine as:

‘To marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel. Once you are married, there is nothing left for you, not even suicide, but to be good.’

To be good, in the vehement language of *Lay Morals*, was something quite different from the respectability indicated in the quotation, an austere adventure involving failure and repentance and ending only in the grave, no smug scheme of parlour decency within conventional limits.

It is significant to note how soon after marriage Stevenson began to write of his past youth as of a period touchingly and irrevocably removed from his present. Long before his final departure into exile we meet in the letters such passages as this, written from Davos to Charles Baxter:

‘Pray write me something cheery. A little Edinburgh gossip, in Heaven’s name. Ah! what would I not give to steal this evening with you through the big, echoing, college archway, and away south under the street lamps, and away to dear Brash’s, now defunct! But the old time is dead also, never, never to revive. It was a sad time too, but so gay and so hopeful, and we had such sport with all our low spirits and all our distresses, that it looks like a kind of lamplit fairyland behind me. O for ten Edinburgh minutes—sixpence between us, and the ever-glorious Lothian Road, or dear mysterious Leith Walk! But here, a sheer hulk, lies poor Tom Bowling; here in this strange place, whose very strangeness would have been heaven to him then; and aspires, yes, C.B., with tears, after the past.’

At thirty-one his reminiscences assume a tone which would have been barely natural in a man twenty years

older; and some sentences in another letter written about the same time yield up some secrets to a more than casual reading.

'I was reckoning up, and since I have known you, already quite a while, I have not, I believe, remained so long in any one place as here in Davos. That tells on my old gipsy nature; like a violin hung up, I begin to lose what music there was in me; and with the music, I do not know what besides, or do not know what to call it, but something radically part of life, a rhythm, perhaps, in one's old and so brutally over-ridden nerves, or perhaps a kind of variety of blood that the heart has come to look for.'

Surely here, if ever anywhere, was the mood for which Byron had written:

So we'll go no more a-roving  
So late into the night,  
Though the heart be still as loving,  
And the moon be still as bright.

Death to adventure was the cry of those entangling affections which the artist could often do without.

For the sword outwears its sheath,  
And the soul wears out the breast,  
And the heart must pause to breathe,  
And love itself have rest.

Between 1879 and 1894, Stevenson's art, it is true, developed with a final miraculous flowering until he was able to write *Weir*; but who can prove that the younger Stevenson was not already giving clear promise of power which might have had, without such tragic delay, as splendour a consummation? One excellent critic, Mr. Cornford, has maintained that if he had written nothing else, *Virginibus* and one short story, *Will o' the Mill*, would have given him a title to fame. Some of the papers in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* prove his capacity for industrious toil and

contain evidence—the essay on Hugo, for example—of critical penetration which was never afterwards exercised on any great scale, although in the letters it gleams out in fugitive judgements on his contemporaries and on himself. As for *Lay Morals*, which, according to Henley, he composed secretly and as if ashamed of it, few of his works are more characteristic; and the fact that when he wrote it he was passing through the period which won him Henley's description 'riotous, intrepid, scornful' merely proves that we can never safely assume what underlies a Scotsman's moralizings.

It has been assumed that those notes and jottings entitled *Reflexions and Remarks on Human Life* belong to a period just before *Lay Morals* was begun. They are some more of the fruits of the earlier winter which found him lying exhausted in the sun of the Riviera, meditating ruefully on his debt to society. Society provided his father with a comfortable income in return for giving it lighthouses and harbours, and he, Louis, had so far contributed nothing to society, while other young men, his fellow students in a university made for all classes, might be perishing for need of all the comforts which were his. Then, after watching the wind trace ripples of silver-grey over the olive-trees, he would collect his strength for the journey back to the hotel, noticing, innocent egotist, the girl at the shop door or the old cabman whom no one would employ because his cab was slow and shabby, but whom, for that very reason, he was going to employ when (and if) the time came to return to Scotland. The seed of some moralizing one day to be eloquently written down had been buried in the darkness; something perhaps, to be found in these *Reflexions* which open with the Stevensonian maxim, 'It is the business of this life to make excuses for others, but none for ourselves', and go on to add that 'there is but one test

of a good life: that the man shall continue to grow more difficult about his own behaviour'.

In the letters of those years, which some critics have tended to slight as the outpourings of youthful egoism leading to nothing, there occur passages—not often long, it is true, but extremely significant—which reveal not only how far the spirit had already developed in that secret stronghold which his volubility only helped to conceal, but how responsive it was to influences which afterwards might have appealed less successfully. One is the well-known passage on the Elgin Marbles, then affecting him very much as they had affected Keats, written when he was twenty-three.

'... I can think of these three deep-breasted women, living out all their days on remote hilltops, seeing the white dawn and the purple even, and the world outspread before them for ever, and no more to them for ever than a sight of the eyes, a hearing of the ears, a far-away interest of the inflexible heart, not pausing, not pitying, but austere with a holy austerity, rigid with a calm and passionless rigidity; and I find them none the less women to the end.

'And think, if one could love a woman like that once, see her once grow pale with passion, and once wring your lips out upon hers, would it not be a small thing to die? Not that there is not a passion of a quite other sort, much less epic, far more dramatic and intimate, that comes out of the very frailty of perishable women; out of the lines of suffering that we see written about their eyes, and that we may wipe out if it were but for a moment; out of the thin hands, wrought and tempered in agony to a fineness of perception, that the indifferent or the merely happy cannot know; out of the tragedy that lies about such a love, and the pathetic incompleteness. This is another thing, and perhaps it is a higher. I look over my shoulder at the three great headless Madonnas, and they look back at me and do not move; see me, and through and over me, the foul life of the city dying to its embers already as the night draws on; and over miles and miles of silent country, set here and

there with lit towns, thundered through here and there with night expresses scattering fire and smoke; and away to the ends of the earth, and the furthest star, and the blank regions of nothing; and they are not moved. My quiet, great-kneed, deep-breasted, well-draped ladies of Necessity, I give my heart to you.'

Or consider two passages on death, one written during Bob Stevenson's dangerous illness, filled with the thought that some hidden goodness 'must sometimes relent and be clement to those frail playthings that he has made, and made so bitterly alive', and concluding with the thought that we make too much of this human life, since clods and trees together may know a kinship of their own; the other written a year later from Swanston in some paroxysm of emotion, breaking off in the middle of a sentence and prompted, it may be, by a wrestle, which he would willingly have prolonged even to death, with some one self out of the many which met in him, some conflict with the 'dark angel' of Lionel Johnson's poem with which he would have had such sympathy. Such spirits must frequently assault the artist, the man of 'more than ordinary organic sensibility', and particularly in a land where a wild race has met with a religion of gloom.

'I feel I desire to go out of the house, and begin life anew in the cool blue night; never to come back here; never, never. Only to go on for ever by sunny day and grey day, by bright night and foul, by high-way and by-way, town and hamlet, until somewhere by a roadside or in some clean inn clean death opened his arms to me and took me to his quiet heart for ever. If soon, good; if late, well then, late—there would be many a long bright mile behind me, many a goodly, many a serious sight; I should die ripe and perfect, and take my garnered experience with me into the cool, sweet earth. For I have died already and survived a death; I have seen the grass grow rankly on my grave; I have heard the train of mourners come weeping and go laughing away again. And when I was alone there in

the kirk-yard, and the birds began to grow familiar with the grave-stone, I have begun to laugh also, and laughed and laughed until night-flowers come out above me. I have survived myself, and somehow live on, a curious changeling, a merry ghost; and do not mind living on, finding it not unpleasant; only had rather, a thousandfold, died and been done with the whole damned show for ever. It is a strange feeling at first to survive yourself, but one gets used to that as to most things. *Et puis*, is it not one's own fault? Why did not one lie still in the grave? Why rise again among men's troubles and toils, where the wicked wag their shock beards and hound the weary out to labour? When I was safe in prison, and stone walls and iron bars were an hermitage about me, who told me to burst the mild constraint and go forth where the sun dazzles, and the wind pierces, and the loud world sounds and jangles all through the weary day? I mind an old print of a hermit coming out of a great wood towards evening and shading his bleared eyes to see all the kingdoms of the earth before his feet, where towered cities and castled hills, and stately rivers, and good corn lands made one great chorus of temptation for his weak spirit, and I think I am the hermit, and would to God I had dwelt ever in the wood of penitence. . . .'

The depth of feeling and the originality of fancy displayed in such passages predispose us to take sides with Henley. Here was an artist in the making, a young man both serious and daft, according to the law of his nationality, who from a 'Covenanting childhood' and conventional upbringing had absorbed the habit of mind which made him declare in *Lay Morals*, 'I do not want to be decent at all, but to be good'. Although the epithets may doubtless seem incongruous to some when considering the suppressions and evasions and dark references to Edinburgh tradition which go to form the standardized outlook on the events of his youth, there are portraits (particularly the one in the first volume of the letters) and utterances of those 'wild and bitterly unhappy' days which suggest something positively disingenuous, something innocent. They reveal

something sound and fine underlying the famous Bohemianism and challenging it to do its worst, something in the plastic boy which matured into the man's desire to show 'God's moral' in his writings. If that quality, that touch of solidity inherited from lighthouse builders and engineers rarely conquered by Nature, had not been there, it is hard to believe that doctored characters like Edmund Gosse and Sidney Colvin would have remained so steadfast in devotion. No mere impulse to enjoy a little vicarious Bohemianism would have survived the first enchantment of friendship with one more reckless than themselves right up to and through the seven years of final separation. But Henley, less disposed to wonder because he understood better and loved differently, could see that the struggles and affectations of the Stevenson of the '70's were inevitable stages in the development of the artist. He has been described as rebelling against the biographer's attempt to turn the joyous pagan of his earlier acquaintance into a plaster saint; but any one who imagines that Henley did not see and love the incipient prig who struggled with the joyous pagan underestimates his intelligence. What Henley found galling was the spectacle of his 'irresponsible Lewis' seeking the emotional and economic responsibilities of married life and gaining them at the price of that nightmare journey to America and the consequent ruination of health. Remembering Henley's own crippled state, remembering the 'little exquisite ghost' of his dead child, we cannot wonder that his fiery spirit wished the reality in his friend to be vindicated, at whatever cost to the inventor of optimistic sayings to be later immortalized in poker-work or illumination for sale at church bazaars. The forced and sententious gaiety of the years of illness between 1879 and 1887, the hectic, restless activity which tried to keep pace with the demands of 'Byles the butcher', the strained note



of happiness—these did not belong to the normal development of the young man whose comment after meeting Henley had been 'I shall try to be of use to him'. The joyous pagan had held within his complex and uneasy personality the seeds of a very different life. Already, in 1872, he had written verses dealing with the death of the father of an acquaintance which, when I first read them printed in the *British Weekly*, seemed to me perfectly at home in its columns.

He is not dead, this friend—not dead,  
But, in the path we mortals tread,  
Got some few, trifling steps ahead,  
And nearer to the end,  
So that you, too, once past the bend,  
Shall meet again, as face to face, this friend  
You fancy dead.

Push gaily on, strong heart! The while  
You travel forward mile by mile,  
He loiters with a backward smile  
Till you can overtake,  
And strains his eyes, to search his wake,  
Or whistling, as he sees you through the brake,  
Waits on a stile.

Nothing in these lines, despite the characteristic unexpectedness of the concluding phrases, suggests a very riotous, scornful or intrepid Stevenson; much rather do they speak of the boy who had repeated to himself a verse from the metrical psalms while he watched the storm at Wick. Barbizon and the Savile Club had provided just that atmosphere of 'laughter and the love of friends', accompanied by vehemently earnest discussion of artistic technique which was his spiritual home. As I have said already, that earlier self, so indefatigable in its artistic self-training, would doubtless have attained, despite all circumstances, a

consummation as faultless as *Weir of Hermiston*; there is evidence of that in *The Great North Road* written in 1884. *Weir* does not derive from the feverish search for romance and the unthinking contempt for the dull life of cities which were imposed upon Stevenson during the middle period of his life and were probably largely pathological. It represents a more straightforward development from the youthful seriousness of the time when he roamed about Edinburgh and its environs with his eyes open for the tragic possibilities of good and evil in sudden glimpses of the humble, ugly faces of poor souls in railway carriages or rain-swept streets.

Even if Henley had not perceived all this, the 'riotous, intrepid, scornful' Stevenson, whose Presbyterian conscience turned on himself eyes which never failed to pierce, perceived it and wrote his own farewell to the years of promise. It was no sentimental Jacobite mood which inspired him to write new words for the Skye Boat Song. Always so exquisitely alive to the thrill of past experience, able to recapture it without excessive sentimentality, he had his own thoughts when he wrote:

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,  
 Say, could that lad be I?  
 Merry of soul, he sailed on a day  
 Over the sea to Skye.

Mull was astern, Rum on the port,  
 Eigg on the starboard bow;  
 Glory of youth glowed in his soul:  
 Where is that glory now?

Give me again all that was there,  
 Give me the sun that shone!  
 Give me the eyes, give me the soul,  
 Give me the lad that's gone!

Billow and breeze, islands and seas,  
Mountains of rain and sun,  
All that was good, all that was fair,  
All that was me is gone.

Nevertheless, the lad had not really died. He, or what he had tried to be, or wished he had been, was to return, to be called Archie Weir, to awaken, through chapters tragically few in number, our sympathy and our affection. Marriage, in breaking the rhythm of his life, had killed youth, but it could not forbid a resurrection.

It is customary, I believe, to prove the quality of one's loyalty to Stevenson and to friendship by speaking of Henley and the *Pall Mall* article with every symptom of that high-souled and lofty indignation whose roots the psychologist loves to expose. For my part, I consider that such a feeling belongs to the days of my less informed immaturity, and I find myself unable to throw stones at Henley with much enthusiasm. Let those do so with better aim who have never in their lives felt the touch of jealousy, or have never fancied that the aspect of some dear friend which they cherish is a portrait peculiar to themselves and lovingly drawn by their own insight. We should all suffer some noticeable fluctuation of sentiment if a friend became 'the whole world's Lewis', and experience our own regrets for days of earlier struggle and intimacy never to be known again.

As for jealousy, there is no getting away from the fact expressed in Stevenson's own words: 'Jealousy, at any rate, is one of the consequences of love; you may like it or not, at pleasure; but there it is.'

Had Stevenson's been a name as forgotten as my well-wishers tried to persuade me it was, this chapter might have had a more dramatic opening in which an unnamed Henley, lonely, crippled, passionate, ambitious, would have been

pictured desperately journeying to an unnamed Edinburgh in search of healing. But although there are, fortunately, still too many Stevensonians and other intelligent persons left for this guessing game, this triumphant, 'I know who she's getting at', to have been feasible, perhaps the last word is with Henley after all. Weary and anxious, he looked up one afternoon and saw 'long Leslie Stephen in his velvet jacket' bringing in to the glorified back kitchen turned hospital ward, a young man who looked as unlike a prospective Edinburgh advocate as a young man could look. 'Apparition', indeed, to a patient hungry for talk and thought and some opportunity to share or combat an outlook, and I believe that 'Apparition' still remains the most comprehensive portrait of Stevenson ever written in prose or verse.

Thin-legged, thin-chested, slight unspeakably,  
Neat-footed and weak-fingered; in his face—  
Lean, large-boned, curved of beak, and touched with race,  
Bold-lipped, rich-tinted, mutable as the sea,  
The brown eyes radiant with vivacity—  
There shines a brilliant and romantic grace,  
A spirit intense and rare, with trace on trace  
Of passion, impudence and energy.  
Valiant in velvet, light in ragged luck,  
Most vain, most generous, sternly critical,  
Buffoon and poet, lover and sensualist:  
A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck,  
Much Antony, of Hamlet most of all,  
And something of the Shorter-Catechist.

## CHAPTER II

### HIS POETRY

'What is a Poet? . . . He is a man . . . pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him, delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.'

WORDSWORTH. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

'By the by, my *Ballads* seem to have been damn bad; all the crickets sing so in their crickety papers; and I have no ghost of an idea on the point myself: verse is always to me the unknowable.'

'The success of *Underwoods* is gratifying. You see, the verses are sane; that is their strong point.'

R. L. S. *Letters*, vol. iii.

ORIGINALITY may be a poor and almost damning quality for which to praise poetry, but for all that it is so obviously the distinctive characteristic of Stevenson as a poet that we have to face the fact. As it is doubtless a symptom of that individualism, so intensely differing from the individualism of the English, which helps to account for Scotland's uneven or usually disappointing level of poetic production, this originality calls for very careful consideration. In the history of English poetry, we have only one period in which that highly personal mode of thought and trick of expression were found united to a command of technique in a harmony such as Stevenson alone among Scottish poets can display; and that period, it may be remarked, was the seventeenth century, in which English thought and sensibility were coloured by that very temper of religious argument and speculation from which Scotland has never yet been free.

English poetry has been accustomed to the work of innovators, and it is novelty rather than originality which provides the enjoyment and stimulus of reading Wyatt and

Surrey, or of trying to find ourselves in the place of the first readers of *Lyrical Ballads*. All the time we are conscious of poetry in the abstract rather than of individual achievement or mannerism. Even when we consider a genius as egoistical as Wordsworth, the current of his poetry seems to slip naturally and easily into the universal river to which it is tributary, quickly absorbed and assimilated, and all this although no one would hesitate to ascribe to racial qualities the main part of his greatness or depreciates even his local patriotism. Take, however, the highest that Scotland can offer us in poetry, Dunbar or Burns, or (if I may still make my claim of greatness for a poet whose English verse outweighs his Scots) Stevenson, and that calm and imperturbable imagery is instantly shattered. Here is no tributary that is willing to fade away into the universal and the abstract, but a chattering, tumbling, foaming burn which aspires to have the channel of its being as clearly marked out in the one great flood into which history wishes to see it absorbed, as it was through its native rock and heather. When some freakish quality in an English writer drives him to express himself in terms of so aggressive an idiosyncrasy, the result may be Browning; but the equally personal Scots poet will have too good a sense of style thus to outrage melody and syntax, and if we must own that no Scotsman could have written the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* or *The Prelude*, we may be thankful that the race has been preserved from variants of *Sordello* and *Pacchiarotto*. Daftness is not the same as eccentricity.

The Scotsman cannot sit still and contemplate. Even the spectacle of a cricket-match, which, according to a French writer, was invented in order to give the English some adequate idea of eternity, is far too protracted for him, and contains too much potential inaction. Not for him the attitude of being contented to enjoy the things which

others understand. His strenuous intelligence wants, all the time, to understand, and he is threatened meanwhile by retrospective pangs of conscience and dark forebodings of ill which destroy that passivity which would refine and sublimate his emotions. So that you cannot expect a Scottish lyric to be written to an un-Scottish philosophy any more than you can expect a Saxon to sing the *Eriskay Love Lilt* or *Sea Sorrow* with such feeling as to reach the depths of the song's peculiar passion.

Those expressions of English poets relating to the passively creative state of mind are meaningless to him; 'diligent indolence', 'negative capability', 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', and the like. (Though it should never be forgotten that when it came to actual composition, Wordsworth paid for the tranquillity in pangs of actual illness.) The climate of the north does not encourage basking in the sun, lingering, meditating. The endless fight against the ferocity of Nature, the infinite labour with which even the scanty resources of the earth are secured, forbids the musing habit of mind. Even the religion of the race is one of criticism rather than of communion, a religion, as it has been said, of 'organized discontent'. The *ego* is always active, and what art may gain in vividness, it loses in universality. Nor is the Scot very much aware of anything outside the sphere of his consciousness, except a jealous God. Even when he appears to unite with the tourists whom he is forced to harbour, in a merely sensuous and unfruitful admiration of his barren miles of 'scenery', he is not capable of feeling, unless he be purely Highland, that the sounding cataract haunts him like a passion. Although the greatest successes of his painters are in landscape and portraiture, and although his writers often display a rare ability to convey the visual charm of a land and climate where weather is a supreme concern, these are but the

visual triumphs of a fairly literal transcription. They please the eye, but they do not affect the soul, as a Wordsworth or a modern English poet of the Georgian school would insist that they must. The Scot is shocked at the idea of taking Nature for his teacher. The impulse from a vernal wood is to him a most unreliable emotion, and as for its ability to teach better than all the sages, frankly he has doubts. Vernal woods are, for him, a luxury, a prettiness, eminently remote from ethics whose home is in the Kirk alone; or they may represent a slight commercial triumph won over the unfriendly forces of earth. This insensitivity to Nature, which is in reality a much needed corrective to the pathetic fallacy school of thought, might not by itself be fatal to the existence of a strong and rich national poetry, especially as it is combined with such power of visualizing through the written word; but unfortunately religion has deprived the Scot of another sense most requisite, if that poetry is to include lyric or epic, and that is the sense of the worth of human personality. If he has missed any one of the Protestant virtues, it is this, and with this, how much! The importance of individual salvation he will grant you; but the more brotherly lessons of the Incarnation he is still slow to learn.

Fortunately, these sad generalizations do not apply to the field of the ballad or popular song, where our hard little country can justly be proud of her rich harvest. It is in the lyric, with its subjective impression of some mood common to mortality, that the poverty is so apparent. And since it is not possible to consider as serious lyrics the pathetically trite sentimentalities of Scottish eighteenth-century pastoral ditties, and since all the true virtue of Burns is to be found anywhere rather than in his love-poetry, I repeat the claim that Stevenson is the greatest Scots writer of English lyrics. Even if the personal element



be so strongly evident that his poems are merely the metrical passages from the journal of Louis Stevenson and rarely achieve the universal, they are so marked with that very freedom and originality of outlook whose dangers have been mentioned, so exquisitely charming and kindly in their adaptation to persons and occasions, so rich in metrical skill, that any country might be proud to include them in its literature.

There is no other writer, pre-eminently a writer of prose, from whom we could collect such a group of lyrics as *Requiem*, the lines addressed to Will H. Low, *Bright is the ring of words*, *The Celestial Surgeon* (an unfortunate title, but no worse than *The Hound of Heaven*), *In Memoriam F.A.S.*, *I will make you brooches*, *The Lost Occasion*, *Home no more home to me*, and the 'hills of home' verses, which stand side by side with the *Canadian Boat Song* as a supreme poem of longing for Scotland.

With his usual clear-sightedness, he understood their limitations very well.

'It went into a second edition', he wrote of *Underwoods*, 'because of my name, I suppose, and its *prose* merits. I do not set up to be a poet. Only an all-round literary man: a man who talks, not one who sings. But I believe the very fact that it was only speech served the book with the public. Horace is much a speaker, and see how popular! Most of Martial is only speech, and I cannot conceive a person who does not love his Martial; most of Burns, also. . . .'

The first quality, then, which strikes the reader of his poems is this remarkably individual idiom in which they are written. Whether they deal with a new house or a tussle with conscience, with the pursuit of beauty (about which, being an artist and a wise one, he talked very little), or his preference in salads, they are, to an extent which simply mocks definition, his and his alone. They are one

and all truant from the school of poetry, owning no precedent and no derivation. In *New Poems*, it is true, there are short pieces which share that jingling and semi-classical fluency which Henley and Andrew Lang could wield so pleasantly.

Though long the way, though hard to bear  
The sun, and rain, the dust and dew;  
Though still attainment and despair  
Inter the old, despoil the new,

There shall at length, be sure, O friends,  
Howe'er ye steer, whate'er ye do—  
At length and at the end of ends,  
The golden city come in view.

That is Stevenson, and not, as you might suppose, a dedication to one of John Buchan's novels.

Other pieces in that collection look like Henley.

In the sun, at the edge of the down,  
The whin-pods cackle  
In desultory valleys;  
And the bank breathes in my face  
Its hot sweet breath—  
Breath that stirs and kindles,  
Sights that suggest, not satisfy—  
Is there never in life or nature  
An opiate for desire?

Free verse, however, could never have satisfied Stevenson's fastidious instinct for rhythm, his aptitude for fitting words to a definite tune, nor was he possessed of a rhetoric equal to Henley's which could, for some readers, compensate for the loss of music.

This particular form of poetic egoism might, of course, completely fail to communicate anything to the reader. The incidents and impressions which feed it and become, in an instant, matter for composition are so very personal that nothing more than cheerful trivialities might result.

Stevenson himself did not always succeed in discriminating between poems which might fitly appear in a collected edition and those engaging pieces of verse which shine with a better grace in private letters—as, for example, the lines on the *Spectator* printed at the end of *Underwoods*. A book of poems on every page of which the author, a conscious artificer, speaks for and about himself might be mere torture to read and leave us craving for some large and spacious impersonality. It might appear a thing so wilful and freakish, so divorced from that sublimation of personal emotion which we expect from art, that oblivion would speedily cover its impertinence; but this is not likely to happen to Stevenson's poems. Even the lovers of poetry are not always looking for the song

seraphically free  
Of taint of personality.

As the late T. Earle Welby wisely wrote:

'The rendering of light pathos, of light love, of ephemeral and artificial beauty, with a fine concern for fidelity to the experience, slight or perverse as it may have been, that was part of the work of the typical poet of the '90's, and it was a real service. For poetry is always in danger of being dominated by respectable, capable, serious writers with large, imperfectly realized themes and that rhetoric which imposes on all but the best judges.'

Although Stevenson is not for one moment to be classed as a 'poet of the '90's', this vindication of the personal lyric applies to him perfectly. Incidentally, the type of pontifical poet hinted at in the quotation has never flourished in Scotland, where the particular rather than the universal is matter for art, and the comfort and hilarity of the 'fire-side clime', or the group drinking at the inn, have inspired more parochial lyrics suited to a small circle than have the solitary epic labours of the man who feels himself to be 'a

dedicated spirit'. Nor does Calvinism encourage a man to see himself as 'dedicated' in quite the independent spirit of Wordsworth's phrase. For the Scot is serious, not solemn; serious along with the medieval poets, not solemn among the romantics.

Again, the passage quoted suggests, by implication, that there is less danger of our being imposed upon by the poetry of light and fugitive events than of our confusing judgement under the influence of some sham oracle. This is very true, since the supposedly trivial events come to all in common and are more easily checked by reference to reason than are the experiences often described as mystical; and here we have a large part of the secret which preserves and establishes this small body of intensely personal poetry. It is completely honest poetry. It never tries to impose on us. In fact, it might be questioned whether Stevenson is not more noticeably sincere in his verse than in his prose, since there he is never betrayed by love of phrases into any eloquent preaching and the moralizer in him is silent while the companion and playfellow speaks. Had he been writing in prose of the death of 'F.A.S.', or the pursuit of 'unborn beauty', he might have been tempted to add some sententious postscript which would have been too gross a weight on the delicate fabric of his emotion. In writing verse, however, he knew where to stop; and even at his most Presbyterian, he would have been hard put to it to find a moral to append to *I will make you brooches* or *In the highlands, in the country places*, so completely there is imagination liberated. It might be argued, in fact, that the former of these is the most beautiful of his lyrics, revealing the most captivating fancy and indicating a surrender to emotion rarely found in the work of so conscious an artist, which allows the verses 'not to make sense' just as they do not 'make sense' in many lovely passages in more widely

known poems—in, for example, *Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths* or parts of *Love in the Valley*. Not often was Stevenson's imagination thus set free. Rhapsody was not for him. I had written the word before I recalled his own claim.

Resign the rhapsody, the dream,  
To men of larger reach;  
Be ours the quest of a plain theme,  
The piety of speech.  
As monkish scribes from morning break  
Toiled till the close of light,  
Nor thought a day too long to make  
One line or letter bright:  
We also with an ardent mind,  
Time, wealth, and fame forgot,  
Our glory in our patience find,  
And skim, and skim the pot:  
Till last, when round the house we hear  
The evensong of birds,  
One corner of blue heaven appear  
In our clear well of words.  
Leave, leave it then, muse of my heart!  
Sans finish and sans frame,  
Leave unadorned by needless art  
The picture as it came.

Even this short poem contains the freakish little touches which come as near consistency as one can expect from an entirely unpredictable spirit; the pot and the clear well of words are completely characteristic. So, too, is the warning to himself relating to 'needless art'. The 'picture as it came' was rarely what the reader finally received; but *I will make you brooches* must be the leading exception to that. We know that many of his poems were as subject to alteration and re-writing as his prose, draft following draft. In *Memoriam*, F.A.S., for example, gave unusual trouble,

being originally cast in rather clumsy blank verse and much revised until the moment came when the right tune rose triumphant over technical mutterings, giving us that sudden long impulsive hurrying line which we recognize as exactly right for the expression of passionate pent-up consolation and regret pressing bravely up to the final human barrier.

Yet, O stricken heart, remember, O remember  
How of human days he lived the better part.  
April came to bloom, and never dim December  
Breathed its killing chills upon the head or heart.

All that life contains of torture, toil, and treason,  
Shame, dishonour, death, to him were but a name.  
Here, a boy, he dwelt through all the singing season,  
And ere the day of sorrow departed as he came.

When Stevenson, returned from travelling in the Cévennes, wrote *Our Lady of the Snows*, Henley subjected the poem to a searching and chiefly metrical analysis, in the course of which he advocated 'making it like Marvell'. The author, in a letter of mock fury, told his adviser to go to the devil; but either he took the advice or he had in him sufficient of that temper which we associate with England's seventeenth-century poets, for it to be superfluous. He himself described Stevenson the poet as 'a kind of prose Herrick, divested of the gift of verse', and although the two are temperamentally poles apart, except for the death-haunted fits of melancholy which overtake all imaginative beings, technically we can trace a similarity in their use of the octosyllabic couplet, which can be, in their hands, the pleasantest medium of chatter or, thanks to economy of words and a just use of a Latinized vocabulary, a vehicle for serious moralizings. It would be interesting to study the proportion in which the technique of that couplet in English verse varies with a generation's theology or a generation's attitude towards the classics; but the Scottish

poet has never been as much indebted as his neighbour to either influence. An examination of the following examples from Herrick reveals the outer and inner resemblance. It is always worth examining the author whom another author calls his exemplar.

Weigh me the fire; or canst thou find  
A way to measure out the mind;  
Distinguish all those floods that are  
Mix'd in that watery theatre . . .  
Show me that world of stars, and whence  
They noiseless spill their influence.

Try if this sober stream you can  
Follow to th' wilder ocean;  
And see if there it heaps unspent  
In that congesting element . . .  
Then may ye recollect the grains  
Of my particular remains,  
After a thousand lusters hurl'd  
By ruffling winds about the world.

TO HIS CONSCIENCE

Can I not sin, but thou wilt be  
My private protonotary?  
Can I not woo thee to pass by  
A short and sweet iniquity?  
I'll cast a mist and cloud upon  
My delicate transgression  
So utter dark as that no eye  
Shall see the hugg'd impiety . . .

I cannot remember ever meeting in another writer a phrase as eminently Stevensonian as 'the hugg'd impiety'.

The essence of Herrick's poetry, if not of all seventeenth-century verse, is its exquisite compression; and we know how much that virtue appealed to Stevenson, who held it as an offence against writing to spend two sentences on

what might have been said in one. His own poems always show that economy which leaves no loose ends hanging out and needs no hyperbolic tags or cloudy generalities to eke out a slender emotion. His adjectives may be sometimes startling, but they are not chosen for sound only, and he was far too great to wallow in the superlative, or to keep on repeating that the inexpressible was inexpressible.

“‘Make it like Marvell’, no less. I’ll tell you what—you may go to the devil.’ Years afterwards, while engaged in weeding and clearing away tropical jungle, he wrote a long, remarkable poem, *The Woodman*. This is easily one of his finest pieces of verse, and within the space of a few lines it offers us ‘the iron halls of life’ and ‘vegetable Londons’ to compare with Marvell’s ‘iron gates’ and ‘vegetable lives’. Incidentally, the whole context of the ‘iron gates’ passage in Marvell is to be found quoted in the letters, and in *New Poems* there occurs a strange fragment, incomplete, not wholly comprehensible and yet able to communicate to us a sense of mystery, which recalls the most familiar lines of Marvell’s poem, the image of Time pursuing man into eternity.

Rivers and winds among the twisted hills,  
Hears, and his hearing slowly fills,  
And hearkens, Death pursuing it.  
As with heaped bees at hiving time  
The boughs are clotted, as (ere prime)  
Heaven swarms with stars, or the city street  
Pullulates with passing feet;  
So swarmed my senses once, that now  
Repose behind my tranquil brow,  
Unsealed, asleep, quiescent, clear;  
Now only the vast shapes I hear—  
Hear—and my hearing slowly fills—  
Rivers and winds among the twisting hills,  
And hearken—and my face is lit—  
Life facing, Death pursuing it.



It is not merely from a love of words that the coincidence of bold and memorable epithets springs. Stevenson did not by chance coin phrases which startle us as do Marvell's 'Sweet militia' of flowers and his 'green thought'. In both writers the ingenuity springs from an individual theology, and it is a quivering sense of 'Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near' which dictates the unexpected adjective or verb at the same moment as it meditates with wonder on the worm in the grave or the daisy growing above it. The result may be what Stevenson, to use one of his more over-worked adjectives, might have called 'quaint', but the origin of this instinct for words which needed no dictionaries to hunt in, was the fear of God and a keen sense of the gulf between His power and the most cunning of human artifice. It is the recurrence of this mood, more than adequately nourished by his racial religion, which marks Stevenson's poetry off from contemporary work and influences. Uniting to a nineteenth-century consciousness a seventeenth-century theology, he could not but remain immune from Victorian fashions. That which Tennyson transmuted into tales and ballads and idylls of the past, that which Rugby and Balliol had politely suppressed in Arnold, that which Browning saw and fled from in a loquacious panic and the pre-Raphaelites simply ignored—the idea of man set upon earth to perform God's will, lay underneath the lightest fragment ever written by Stevenson. The only English poet of his day who held a similar outlook and could manifest it in an idiom of his own was Patmore.

Before passing on, a long passage from *The Woodman* must be quoted, in order to note not only the wild originality comparable to Marvell but also Stevenson's even more skilful management of the sustained period and paragraph in this familiar metre.

In all the grove, nor stream nor bird  
Nor aught beside my blows was heard,  
And the woods wore their noonday dress—  
The glory of their silentness.  
From the island summit to the seas,  
Trees mounted, and trees drooped, and trees  
Groped upward in the gaps. The green  
Inarbour'd talus and ravine  
By fathoms. By the multitude,  
The rugged columns of the wood  
And bunches of the branches stood:  
Thick as a mob, deep as a sea,  
And silent as eternity.

The fair and stately things,  
Impassive as departed kings,  
All still in the wood's stillness stood,  
And dumb. The rooted multitude  
Nodded and brooded, bloomed and dreamed,  
Unmeaning, undivined. It seemed  
No other part, no hope, they knew,  
Than clutch the earth and seek the blue.

'Mid vegetable king and priest  
And stripling, I (the only beast)  
Was at the beast's work, killing: hewed  
The stubborn roots across, bestrewed  
The glebe with the dislusted leaves,  
And bade the saplings fall in sheaves;  
Bursting across the tangled math  
A ruin that I called a path,  
A Golgotha that, later on,  
When rains had watered, and suns shone,  
And seeds enriched the place, should bear  
And be called garden. Here and there,  
I spied and plucked by the green hair  
A foe more resolute to live,  
The toothed and killing sensitive.  
He, semi-conscious, fled the attack;  
He shrank and tucked his branches back;

And straining by his anchor strand,  
Captured and scratched the rooting hand.  
I saw him crouch, I felt him bite;  
And straight my eyes were touched with sight.  
I saw the wood for what it was:  
The lost and the victorious cause,  
The deadly battle pitched in line,  
Saw silent weapons cross and shine:  
Silent defeat, silent assault,  
A battle and a burial vault.

The conclusion of the poem, a meditation on the 'un-brotherly war of bread' which sees translated into social life the deadly competition of the silent green forest and the hard laws of survival, recalls a passage in *Memories and Portraits*. There he speaks, with that curiously premature touch of age which makes his unhappy youth seem so remote, of the thoughts on the Franco-Prussian war and, by implication, on the war of life, which came to him on the Atlantic rock of Dhu Heartach, where, as a boy, he had been present at the building of the lighthouse.

Another poem which should be observed is that nameless piece towards the end of *Underwoods*, inspired by the ownership of *Skerryvore*, which, with a broken fluency unlike his usual careful syntax, makes the contrast between definite material possession and that precarious tenure of mortality which was to him, cruelly, a matter of daily experience.

My body which my dungeon is,  
And yet my parks and palaces:—  
Which is so great that there I go  
All the day long to and fro,  
And when the night begins to fall  
Throw down my bed and sleep, while all  
The building hums with wakefulness—  
Even as a child of savages  
When evening takes her on her way

(She having roamed a summer's day  
 Along the mountain-sides and scalp),  
 Sleeps in an antre of that alp:—

Which is so broad and high that there,  
 As in the topless fields of air,  
 My fancy soars like to a kite  
 And faints in the blue infinite:—

Which is so strong, my strongest throes  
 And the rough world's besieging blows  
 Not break it, and so weak withal,  
 Death ebbs and flows in its loose wall  
 As the green sea in fishers' nets,  
 And tops its topmost parapets:—

Which is so wholly mine that I  
 Can wield its whole artillery,  
 And mine so little, that my soul  
 Dwells in perpetual control,  
 And I but think and speak and do  
 As my dead fathers move me to:—

If this born body of my bones  
 The beggared soul so barely owns,  
 What money passed from hand to hand,  
 What creeping custom of the land,  
 What deed of author or assign,  
 Can make a house a thing of mine?

Nowhere has he made a more moving allusion to the stupendous fragility of the body's exquisite rhythm; and the strong belief in heredity expressed here is one of his perpetual characteristics, yet another of the problems over which he worried his 'Scotch Stevenson head'.

To the same category belongs a strange set of lines, found in a note-book, hard to decipher so far as arrangement of couplet goes, having for subject railway engines among mountains and dating, no doubt, from the Silverado period.

Silent all night long we slept,  
 Inactive we, steeds of the day,  
 And shakers of the mountains lay,

Earth's oldest veins our dam and sire,  
Iron chimeras fed with fire . . .  
. . . We, the unweary, lay at rest,  
The sleepless lamp burned on our crest,  
And in the darkness, far and nigh,  
We heard our iron compeers cry.

No ordinary poet of the later nineteenth century would have felt it like that, and Kipling would have obscured it with technicalities—which the writer who belonged to a family of engineers did not employ. Once again we find Stevenson writing with the queer downright felicity of the seventeenth century. Just so would Marvell have written if he had been familiar with railways.

Stevenson possessed an unusual mastery of metre. The octosyllabic couplet, as we have seen, he could wield in the succinct form, where couplets are couplets, or could elaborate into long sustained paragraphs; or he could shape it into definite quatrains as in the poem which begins 'It is the season now to go', and *The Lost Occasion*. He could create the verse form which we find in the well-known 'trusty, dusky' poem to his wife, which I must own I consider very unsuitable to its theme, as it recalls the pounding of feet marking time on a parade-ground, rather than a love-song. He could attempt, as in *Mater Triumphans* and *Tropic Rain*, metres suggested to him while reading Morris with enjoyment, and, soon after his death, to be popularized by Kipling; but these are kittle cattle, long resounding lines which need much padding out and lend themselves to the clothing of rather rhetorical and unsound doctrines. I imagine that he detected the hollowness of these, and preferred metres more stringently and sincerely curtailed, just as he outgrew his early love of playing with those complicated and heartless French metres whose accents so easily deceive.

There are other poems which it is extraordinarily difficult to handle in a critical fashion, but which demand consideration because they are the most moving which he wrote. These are *To My Old Familiars* and the two pieces which follow. It is true that the lines addressed to Sidney Colvin, by introducing allusions to British Museum exhibits from the South Seas, manage to speak with a slightly more impersonal accent, but they remain, for all that, a cry from the heart. All these pieces are so purely personal, representing a mood of sheer longing for the past and for home which might easily have been ruined by that Scots sentimentality from which he remained magnificently free, that analysis of them would be an outrage to reserve, to friendship. The emotions which he recalls are not sublimated by age and time (as far as years go, he was still young when he wrote them) to some placid region of the ideal and absolute. Nothing could have been farther from his mind than the universal element in art or any other philosophic figment. No 'man', ideal and impossible reader of formal poetry, no 'man' in the economic or even, for once, in the theological sense, was in his mind; not even universal youth, but, even more than usual, Louis Stevenson, young, baffled by the wonder of life, half-weary of that disreputable sphere of Edinburgh which he had begun by glorifying, torn between a tortured affection for his home and ambition which could not be realized without wounding his parents.

And for that poor ambition? It springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit.

Sometimes that aspect of it struck the celebrated author far from home who described himself, in depressed mood, as the author of 'a few stories for boys'.

He felt; he must write. 'Pretty secondrate, but felt' was his own judgement on these pieces, but his admirers know

that here—although technically they leave nothing to be desired—it is not their ability to weigh up syllables and deliberations and caesuras that matter; it is their sympathy that is tested and their power of understanding one whom they are fond of saying they love, and of sharing an experience when they read:

I have since then contended and rejoiced;  
Amid the glories of the house of life  
Profoundly entered, and the shrine beheld:  
Yet when the lamp from my expiring eyes  
Shall dwindle and recede, the voice of love  
Fall insignificant on my closing ears,  
What sound shall come but the old cry of the wind  
In our inclement city? what return  
But the image of the emptiness of youth,  
Filled with the sound of footsteps and that voice  
Of discontent and rapture and despair?  
So, as in darkness, from the magic lamp,  
The momentary pictures gleam and fade  
And perish, and the night resurges—these  
Shall I remember, and then all forget.

There, on the sunny frontage of a hill,  
Hard by the house of kings, repose the dead,  
My dead, the ready and the strong of word,  
Their works, the salt-encrusted, still survive;  
The sea bombards their founded towers; the night  
Thrills pierced with their strong lamps. The artificers,  
One after one, here in this grated cell,  
Where the rain erases and the rust consumes,  
Fell upon lasting silence. Continents  
And continental oceans intervene;  
A sea uncharted, on a lampless isle,  
Environs and confines their wandering child  
In vain. The voice of generations dead  
Summons me, sitting distant, to arise,  
My numerous footsteps nimbly to retrace,  
And, all mutation over, stretch me down  
In that denoted city of the dead.

The sad and unaffected simplicity of those passages stamps them on our memory for ever. There is no artifice. The pathos is eloquently concentrated in the epithets—'expiring eyes' and 'closing ears', 'insignificant', 'inclement', the 'uncharted sea' and 'lampless isle', the 'wandering' child of the dead recognizes his 'numerous footsteps'. A whole history is packed into those few adjectives, and we may note how tellingly he could always use the negative epithet, the 'insignificant' and 'uncharted' and 'lampless'.

Although it must by now have become quite brazen from frequent inclusion in anthologies, I feel inclined to couple the poem addressed to Crockett with those other soliloquies from exile. Perhaps it owes its publicity to the charm of its inimitable metre, whose long, impulsive lines so well echo the dumb surge of homesickness in the heart, returning defeated to the bleak monosyllables of the close. One realizes the exquisite skill and ear for melody which were proved by his thus adapting to metre the blank rhythm of the actual words in Crockett's dedication '... where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying. *His* heart remembers how'. And of course the Scot, or other inhabitant of a small and unfortunate country, is usually picturesque in exile. For all that, I feel that the poem asks for sensitive handling, for the consideration due rather to a beautiful piece of life than to artistry. Even a Scot must, by some inner process, have made it his own before he can use it as a public symbol of nostalgia as he uses the lone shieling, for it is intimate and fragile, and the temper which sees its lost country as a place of the graves of martyrs is very different from the temper which deplores, however justly, the outrage of the banished crofter.

Be it granted me to behold you again in dying,  
Hills of home! and to hear again the call;  
Hear about the graves of the martyrs the peewees crying,  
And hear no more at all.



If forced to choose, and setting aside those intimate pieces which have been mentioned, I believe I should choose the lines *To Will H. Low* ('Damned bad lines in return for a beautiful book') as Stevenson's highest lyric achievement. His own description of it is 'a kind of image of things that I pursue and cannot reach. . . . This is the life we have chosen: well, the choice was made, but I should make it again'.

## TO WILL H. LOW

Youth now flees on feathered foot,  
Faint and fainter sounds the flute,  
Rarer songs of gods; and still  
Somewhere on the sunny hill,  
Or along the winding stream,  
Through the willows, flits a dream;  
Flits, but shows a smiling face,  
Flees, but with so quaint a grace,  
None can choose to stay at home,  
All must follow, all must roam.

This is unborn beauty: she  
Now in air floats high and free,  
Takes the sun and breaks the blue;—  
Late with stooping pinion flew  
Raking hedgerow trees, and wet  
Her wing in silver streams, and set  
Shining foot on temple roof:  
Now again she flies aloof,  
Coasting mountain clouds and kiss't  
By the evening's amethyst.

In wet wood and miry lane  
Still we pant and pound in vain;  
Still with leaden foot we chase  
Waning pinion, fainting face;  
Still with grey hair we stumble on,  
Till, behold, the vision gone!

Where hath fleeting beauty led?  
To the doorway of the dead.  
Life is over, life was gay:  
We have come the primrose way.

The 'beautiful book' was the edition of *Lamia* illustrated by Low. It is remarkably appropriate that this choice example of Stevenson's verse should be an offering to a friend, for he possessed to the full that charming playful instinct which uses an art as a courtesy and a benediction to the daily traffic of life. And only in very rare moments of self-revelation did he speak thus of the quest for beauty and the futility which might well seem the end promised to the artist who has chosen to take a primrose way. The silvery couplets most skilfully echo the divine haste and hurry of the quest. Original and yet correct, it merges the individual complaint, which at the same time is joy, of the troubled creative spirit into the universal pursuit of the ideal. It surprises us, but not by mere defiance of form, it does not shock and irritate us, however whimsical the thought.

Of *New Poems* it is more difficult to speak. Its contents, or at least the more youthful and autobiographic pieces, form a series of tentative sketches which may easily be linked to passages in the letters or early travel-books. They fail because they consist largely of love-poems which Stevenson never wrote successfully. There is, indeed, one set of verses to Charles Baxter, reprinted from the letters and written at the age of twenty-one, which has always seemed to me to be a proof of his skill in managing metre, which has a rippling fluency much too charming for its theme, that being an anticipation of age's too-flattering recollection of what he calls, in a phrase as horrible as the modern talk of 'usherettes' in the cinema, 'frail sickly amourettes'. This detestable word, which is also to be

found elsewhere in his writings, suggests too forcibly a certain clumsiness, not to say coarseness of fibre, in the Lowland Scot in love. Nevertheless, in form the verses are delightful.

You know how they never perish,  
How, in time of later art,  
Memories consecrate and sweeten  
These defaced and tempest-beaten  
Flowers of former years we cherish,  
Half a life, against our heart.

All that loveliest and best is,  
Aurcole-fashion round their heads,  
They that looked in life but plainly,  
How they stir our spirits vainly  
When they come to us Alcestis-  
like, returning from the dead!

Not the old love but another,  
Bright she comes at Memory's call  
Our forgotten vows reviving  
To a newer, livelier living,  
As the dead child to the mother  
Seems the fairest child of all.

*New Poems* is rich in those small occasional poems which he struck off in moods of play. *The Family*, that picturesque account of the Vailima household, is entertaining and characteristic, full of a rather pedantic gaiety and vivid phraseology. Nor can the verses written at Davos to Dew-Smith be forgotten, as they prove how unequalled a facility Stevenson possessed for writing light verse filled with the most exquisite absurdities.

The place? Although they call it Platz,  
I will be bold and state my view;  
It's not a place at all—and that's  
The bottom verity, my Dew.

There are, as I will not deny,  
 Innumerable inns; a road;  
 Several Alps indifferent high;  
 The snow's inviolable abode;

Eleven English parsons, all  
 Entirely inoffensive; four  
 True human beings—what I call  
 Human—the deuce a cipher more;

A river that from morn to night  
 Down all the valley plays the fool;  
 Not once she pauses in her flight,  
 Nor knows the comfort of a pool;

But still keeps up, by straight or bend,  
 The self-same pace she hath begun—  
 Still hurry, hurry, to the end—  
 Good God, is that the way to run?

If I a river were, I hope  
 That I should better realise  
 The opportunities and scope  
 Of that romantic enterprise.

But what, my Dew, in idle mood,  
 What prate I, minding not my debt?  
 What do I talk of bad or good?  
 The best is still a cigarette.

Me whether evil fate assault,  
 Or smiling providences crown—  
 Whether on high the eternal vault  
 Be blue, or crash with thunder down—

I judge the best, whate'er befall,  
 Is still to sit on one's behind,  
 And, having duly moistened all,  
 Smoke with an unperturbed mind.

Finally, in graver mood, *New Poems* contains one poem of almost unutterable pathos, written, it has been stated, at

the age of twenty-five, to silence criticism and remind us that 'the evening brings a' hame'.

Death, to the dead for evermore  
A King, a God, the last, the best of friends—  
Whene'er this mortal journey ends  
Death, like a host, comes smiling to the door;  
Smiling, he greets us, on that tranquil shore  
Where neither piping bird nor peeping dawn  
Disturbs the eternal sleep,  
But in the stillness far withdrawn  
Our dreamless rest for evermore we keep.

For as from open windows forth we peep  
Upon the night-time star beset  
And with dews for ever wet;  
So from this garish life the spirit peers;  
And lo! as a sleeping city doth outspread,  
Where breathe the sleepers evenly; and lo!  
After the loud wars, triumphs, trumpets, tears  
And clamour of man's passion, Death appears  
And we must rise and go.

Soon are eyes tired with sunshine; soon the ears  
Weary of utterance, seeing all is said;  
Soon, racked by hopes and fears,  
The all-pondering, all-contriving head,  
Weary with all things, wearies of the years;  
And our sad spirits turn toward the dead;  
And the tired child, the body, longs for bed.

But on the whole, in reading many of the earlier poems here included, we wonder if we ought to have been permitted so to intrude, especially when they express the passionate devotion, the adoration, which Mrs. Sitwell inspired in him, appearing like a veritable goddess in the blackest moments of those wretched years between nineteen and twenty-three when, without her guidance and that of Fleeming Jenkin, he might have made shipwreck of his potential greatness. To mark these flutterings and

bewildered cries and struggles with the old problems of the Sixth of Romans, to see apparent defeat turned aside with a characteristic levity or endured with an equally characteristic determination, is to realize again that the 'fine young spirit' whom Mrs. Sitwell had asked Sidney Colvin to help had set out to travel by a road which should never have led to anywhere in sight of *Treasure Island*. In so far as *New Poems* may have made this clear to those who had never been forced by the inconsistencies and problems arising from his later prose works to form their own estimate of power unfulfilled, their publication can be justified.

One or two of these early poems almost suggest *A Shropshire Lad*, not only by their tone of stoical courage but because their terse completeness of phrase reminds us that Stevenson, always an advocate of compression, showed a mastery of the succinct and an instinctive abhorrence of the vague and diffuse surprising in one who was so very little of an orthodox classical scholar.

#### PRELUDE

By sunny market-place and street  
Wherever I go my drum I beat,  
And wherever I go in my coat of red  
The ribbons flutter about my head.

I seek recruits for wars to come—  
For slaughterless wars I beat the drum,  
And the shilling I give to each new ally  
Is hope to live and courage to die.

I know that new recruits shall come  
Wherever I beat the sounding drum,  
Till the roar of the march by country and town  
Shall shake the tottering Dagoes down.

For I was objectless as they  
And loitering idly day by day;  
But whenever I heard the recruiters come,  
I left my all to follow the drum.

---

Stout marches lead to certain ends,  
We seek no Holy Grail, my friends—  
That dawn should find us every day  
Some fraction farther on our way.

The dumb lands sleep from east to west,  
They stretch and turn and take their rest.  
The cock has crown in the steading-yard,  
But priest and people slumber hard.

We two are early forth, and hear  
The nations snoring far and near.  
So peacefully their rest they take,  
It seems we are the first awake!

—Strong heart! this is no royal way,  
A thousand cross-roads seek the day;  
And, hid from us, to left and right,  
A thousand seekers seek the light.

---

I saw red evening through the rain  
Lower above the steaming plain;  
I heard the hour strike small and still,  
From the black belfry on the hill.

Thought is driven out of doors to-night  
By bitter memory of delight;  
The sharp constraint of finger tips,  
Or the shuddering touch of lips.

· · · · ·  
Behind me I could still look down  
On the outspread feverish town;  
But before me, still and grey  
And lonely was the forward way.

But his poems in this vein do not usually manage to come to a conclusion without some mention of forces which are alien to the Housman universe—hope, that lesser Stevensonian deity, or, in the last resort, God—the God of Bethel who links Scots together everywhere.

As for the *Ballads*, it is the habit of critics to speak of

these coldly, and possibly only the very devoted Stevensonian finds much of interest in this attempt to play, somewhat according to a Morris design, the tribal bard for the noble savage. The interest chiefly takes the form of surprise. These, the reader reminds himself, are by the author of *An Inland Voyage* and *Will o' the Mill*. What will he do next, this unpredictable romantic, so susceptible to new influences, for ever pouncing unexpectedly on some unattempted species of writing and now throwing himself, with a zest which diverted his energy from its true goal, into tropical legend and folk-lore? His work as novelist had by now made him a master of that rather laboriously antique diction for which the *Ballads* gave good scope; and sometimes it has its charm.

Swift as the swallow's wings, the diligent hands on the drum  
Fluttered and hurried and throbbed. 'Ah, woe that I hear you  
come,'

Rua cried in his grief, 'a sorrowful sound to me,  
Mounting far and faint from the resonant shore of the sea!  
Woe in the song! for the grave breathes in the singers' breath,  
And I hear in the tramp of the drums the beat of the heart of  
death.

Home of my youth! no more, through all the length of the  
years,

No more to the place of the echoes of early laughter and tears,  
No more shall Rua return; no more as the evening ends,  
To crowded eyes of welcome, to the reaching hands of friends.'

In quaint contrast to this, the love passages between Rua and Taheia in *The Feast of Famine* come a good deal nearer the lyric ideal of love than he had yet come in fiction.

Taheia, song of the morning, how long is the longest love?  
A cry, a clasp of the hands, a star that falls from above!  
Ever at morn in the blue, and at night when all is black,  
Ever it skulks and trembles with the hunter, Death, on its  
track.



*Ticonderoga* and *Heather Ale* are better poems, and the former is a splendid narrative; but their author seems to be the most remote of the host of Stevensons who put so many different pens to paper. They stand beside his personal poems as self-contained and adequate pieces of machinery. The artificer has nothing to say about himself, and we are left cold.

In one of the soundest of the many recent books on Scotland, much has been made of the fact that the Scots are a queer people. It is the adjective which Stevenson applied to his portrait as painted by Sargent—‘dam’ queer’; but then, comments one biographer, ‘Louis Stevenson *was* dam’ queer’. If that characteristic emerges anywhere in his verse, it is in *Moral Emblems*, that oddest of beguilements for a writer at Davos. The sombre blots and swirling shadows of the tiny woodcuts are in perfect harmony with the grim little verses. The toy printing establishment was a pastime shared with a schoolboy, but there is nothing very schoolboyish or affectedly piratical about some of the fiercely satiric couplets which emerged from the game. This is not the pleasantly callous nonsense of our own modern *Cautionary Tales*, but a puppet-show directed by a satiric imagination, reminding us again of that not quite human element discovered by some observers in Stevenson. The Scot has always had an aptitude for enjoying the most terrific sarcasm and caustic abuse, such as Dunbar and his contemporaries worked off in the recognized literary form of ‘flyting’, but here is something altogether more sinister and recondite—and by the author of *A Christmas Sermon* and *The Celestial Surgeon*.

With storms a-weather, rocks a-lee,  
The dancing skiff puts forth to sea.  
The lone dissenter in the blast  
Recoils before the sight aghast.

Why the 'lone dissenter'? He seems to be related to the 'amazed evangelist' whom James Bridie has borrowed from Stevenson. He must join the 'foolhardy geographer', snoring in the desert, and the 'pallid miller' in his 'precarious mill' as the playthings of an almost feverish preoccupation with nonsense. The more straightforward pieces of satire are typical of Stevenson's opposition from his youth up to the conventional standards of success and prosperity.

The frozen peaks he once explored,  
 But now he's dead and by the board.  
 How better far at home to have stayed  
 Attended by the parlour maid,  
 And warmed his knees before the fire  
 Until the hour when folks retire!  
*So, if you would be spared to friends  
 Do nothing but for business ends.*

---

Industrious pirate! see him sweep  
 The lonely bosom of the deep,  
 And daily the horizon scan  
 From Hatteras or Matapan.  
 Be sure, before that pirate's old,  
 He will have made a pot of gold,  
 And will retire from all his labours  
 And be respected by his neighbours.  
*You also scan your life's horizon  
 For all that you can clap your eyes on.*

Even when the verse opens with heartless fooling, it often ends in hinting blackly at that stark reality of crime and violence which exercised on him such a lifelong fascination.

Mark, printed on the opposing page  
 The unfortunate effects of rage.  
 A man (who might be you or me)  
 Hurls another into the sea.  
 Poor soul, his unreflecting act  
 His future joys will much contract,

And he will spoil his evening toddy  
By dwelling on that mangled body.

The two fantasies entitled *Moral Tales* are in the vein of Mr. Belloc, but Mr. Belloc is seldom as grim. To read these pieces several times over might be very edifying to the critics who weary us with their banal talk about the author's blitheness and optimism. The tale of the unscrupulous chemist murdered in a fit of moral indignation by the pirate who held in his profession such an honourable position, is more than a recurrence of boyish hatred of the respectable hypocrite. It expresses a whole reading of life, a Calvinistic scrutiny of the wicked and inexplicable heart of man—written, in play with a schoolboy, by the author of *An Apology for Idlers* and *A Child's Garden*.

Of *A Child's Garden* itself, I do not think there is much to be said. Like the other books for which Stevenson is most celebrated, *Treasure Island* and *Jekyll and Hyde*, it is merely an offshoot from the main development of his art, a *tour de force* having little connexion with the inner mysteries of personality, containing very little of the essential man and, though successful, lacking the highest technical finish of which that real man was capable. Too much has been made of his childhood by those who are rightly impressed by his strange and sensitive faculty for recalling events of that time, but forget how thoroughly abnormal the childhood of even a robust only child must be. The only child speaks with the voice of the adults who play with him and sees life and other children through adult eyes. Hence comes that pathetic elderliness which marks some of Stevenson's youthful letters and crops out in such passages as the description, written when he was twenty, of young Amy Tollemache whom he met on the journey to Oban.

'I never yet saw a girl so innocent and fresh, so perfectly modest without the least trace of prudery.'

There is no doubt that he remembered with almost painful clearness the events of his delicate childhood and the central part which he played to parents and nurse solicitous almost to the point of frenzy for the small invalid who was laughed at by other children for being 'hauf a laddie, hauf a lassie, hauf a yellow yite'. But it does not need modern psychology to confirm his wife's opinion that he 'had little understanding of children in general', expecting them one and all to play as he had played, to hear and see in nature and book, what he, the solitary little Presbyterian genius, whose nights were so often spent in coughing or waking in terror from dreams of hell, had heard and seen. All that his poetry for children demands is regard for the fact that most of it was written with the left hand in a dark room, under an even unusually acute combination of physical disabilities, and thanksgiving for the happiness which, despite piety and Calvinism, saved him from such childish tragedies as we read of in *Father and Son*.

Finally, we come to the poems written in Scots and to the thorniest part of whatever controversy may arise from my statement, here repeated, that Stevenson is the greatest of Scots poets who have written in English. I would venture on one other superlative. *The Scotsman's Return from Abroad* (and *Embro' Hie Kirk* approaches it very close) is the finest piece of national satire written since Burns, and seems likely to remain so. The *déraciné* post-war Nationalist, attempting to make Scots the medium for expression of an outlook the less Scottish as it may be more emancipated, will never produce anything as wholly satisfying and delightful as this:

The kirk was filled, the door was steiked;  
Up to the pu'pit ance I keeked;  
I was mair pleased than I can tell—  
It was the minister himsel'!

Proud, proud was I to see his face,  
 After sae long awa' frae grace.  
 Pleased as I was, I'm no' denyin'  
 Some maitters were no edifyin';  
 For first I fand—an' here was news!—  
 Mere hymn-books cockin' in the pews—  
 A humanised abomination,  
 Unfit for ony congregation.  
 Syne, while I still was on the tenter,  
 I scunnered at the new prezenor;  
 I thocht him gesterin' an' cauld—  
 A sair declension frae the auld.  
 Syne, as though a' the faith was wreckit,  
 The prayer was not what I'd exspeckit.

Himsel', as it appeared to me,  
 Was no' the man he used to be.  
 But just as I was growin' vext  
 He waled a maist judeccious text,  
 An', launchin' into his prelections,  
 Swoopt, wi' a skirl, on a' defections.

O what a gale was on my speerit  
 To hear the p'int o' doctrine clearit,  
 And a' the horrors o' damnation  
 Set furth wi' faithfu' ministration!  
 Nae shauchlin' testimony here—  
 We were a' damned, an' that was clear.  
 I owned, wi' gratitude an' wonder,  
 He was a plesure to sit under.

The note which he prefaced to these poems is well worth study by the moderns, some of whom might profitably inscribe on their study walls these words:

'Just to prove that I belong to my age and have in me the stuff of a reformer, I have used modification marks throughout. Thus I can tell myself, not without pride, that I have added a fresh stumbling-block for English readers, and to a page of print in my native tongue have lent a new uncouthness. *Sed non nobis.*'

It is hard to say exactly how these would receive the confessions of the next passage which I quote; but to the candid regret of its conclusion as many as can read Scots may all subscribe.

'I note again, that among our new dialecticians, the local habitat of every dialect is given to the square mile. I could not emulate this nicety if I desired; for I simply wrote my Scots as well as I was able, not caring if it hailed from Lauderdale or Angus, from the Mearns or Galloway; if I had ever heard a good word, I used it without shame; and when Scots was lacking, or the rhyme jibbed, I was glad (like my betters) to fall back on English. . . . And if it be not pure, alas! what matters it? The day draws near when this illustrious and malleable tongue shall be quite forgotten; and Burns's Ayrshire, and Dr. MacDonald's Aberdeen-awa', and Scott's brave, metropolitan utterance will be all equally the ghosts of speech. Till then I would love to have my hour as a native Maker, and be read by my own country-folk in our own dying language: an ambition surely rather of the heart than of the head, so restricted as it is in prospect of endurance, so parochial in bounds of space.'

The well-known Scottish stanza in which by far the greater number of the poems are written, is one which limits and binds, forbidding the Muse any very long or irregular excursion. Its concluding couplet can express a regretful or contented farewell sigh, or can add an effective postscript to some biting Scottish sarcasm.

Here aft, weel neukit by my lane,  
 Wi' Horace, or perhaps Montaigne,  
 The mornin' hours hae come an' gane  
     Abune my heid—  
 I wadna gi'en a chucky-stane  
     For a' I'd read.

What you would like 's a palace ha',  
 Or Sinday parlour dink an' braw  
 Wi' a' things ordered in a raw  
     By denty leddies.

Weel, then, ye canna hae't: that's a'  
That to be said is.

It is a metre which lends itself admirably to the conventional expression of unambitious moods, to Horatian musings on comfort and friendship, rounded off, it may be, with a tear born of Scots conviviality. At the same time, its repeated rhymes can be used to drive home the angry lesson of satire or complaint. Burns could use it to either tune, and so could Stevenson. That charming picture of Swanston Cottage, *Ille Terrarum*, is usually quoted as one of his best examples of the softer vein of dialect, and it certainly suggests that pastoral atmosphere from which so many of the memorable letters of his youth were written, an atmosphere where it would seem family tension never ran as high as in Heriot Row and some measure of peace could usually be found. To prove what opposite effect the stanza could produce, take these forcible verses from *Embro' Hie Kirk*.

While thus the lave o' mankind's lost,  
O' Scotland still God mak's His boast—  
Puir Scotland, on whose barren coast

A score or twa  
Auld wives wi' mutches an' a hoast  
Still keep His law.

In Scotland, a wheen canty, plain,  
Douce, kintry-leevin' folk retain  
The Truth—or did so aince—alane  
Of a' men leevin';  
An' noo just twa o' them remain—  
Just Begg an' Niven.<sup>1</sup>

For noo, unfaithfu' to the Lord,  
Auld Scotland joins the rebel horde;  
Her human hymn-books on the board  
She noo displays:  
An' Embro Hie Kirk's been restored  
In popish ways.

<sup>1</sup> Two Scotsmen, celebrated for their pronounced Presbyterian orthodoxy.

Up, Niven, or ower late—an' dash  
 Laigh in the glaur that carnal hash;  
 Let spires and pews wi' gran' stramash  
     Thegither fa';  
 The rumlin' kist o' whustles smash  
     In pieces sma'.

Ding, devel, dunt, destroy, an' ruin,  
 Wi' carnal stanes the square bestrewin',  
 Till your loud chaps frae Kyle to Fruin,  
     Frae Hell to Heeveen,  
 Tell the guid wark that baith are doin'—  
     Baith Begg an' Niven.

The stanza is less fitted to narrative than to soliloquy, but it was employed with the most vivid effect in *A Lowden Sabbath Morn*, the touches of pathos, humour, and satire nicely balancing to produce an idyll in which the sentiment is never sugary and the realism is never ugly. At one moment, in the kirkyard

... the guidman sall bide awec  
 To dwell amang the deid; to see  
 Auld faces clear in fancy's e'e:  
     Belike to hear  
 Auld voices fa'in' saft an' slee  
     On fancy's ear.

But in a second we hear that the minister is approaching

Filled fu' wi' clavers about sin  
 An' man's estate . . .

and by the time the conclusion of the poem is reached there is no sign of the village bard, for it is the emancipated critic, the perpetually self-criticizing Scot, who reflects:

Bethankit! what a bonny creed!  
 What mair would ony Christian need?—  
 The braw words rumm'le ower his heid,  
     Nor steer the sleeper;  
 And in their restin' graves, the deid  
     Sleep aye the deeper.



On the whole, Stevenson found the use of dialect a refuge and a handy medium for delivering himself of moods of depression and speculation in comparison with which the friendly and social emotions which were expressed in his other poems were merely superficial. His own opinion was that his Scots verse contained 'more marrow and fatness and more ruggedness', and the more vigorous and resonant and biting language certainly lends itself to the expression of forceful emotion. There is none of the glorious morning face about his Scots poems, and perhaps his admirers will be all the happier for that, for that phrase goes far to weaken the sound psychology of its poem, and his conscious gaiety can be far more embarrassing to those who love to feel they are his companions than his survey and acceptance of the ironies and enigmas of life, and the Scot is one of the most ungraceful of optimists. It is his gloom which is marked by the racial instinct for style.

It would have been impossible, for example, to write *My Conscience* as straightforwardly in English.

Whan day (an' a' excüse) has gane,  
An' wark is düne, and duty's plain,  
An' to my chalmer a' my lane  
I creep apairt,  
My conscience! hoo the yammerin' pain  
Stends to my heart!

A' day wi' various ends in view  
The hairsts o' time I had to pu',  
An' made a hash wad staw a soo,  
Let be a man!—  
My conscience! whan my han's were fu',  
Whaur were ye than?

An' there were a' the lures o' life,  
There plecture skirlin' on the fife,  
There anger, wi' the hotchin' knife

*His Poetry*

Ground shairp in Hell—  
 My conscience!—you that 's like a wife!—  
 Whaur was yoursel'?

Nor could *The Counterblast Ironical* have been expressed better than in Scots, dialect lending point to its intimacy and ferocity—intimacy, even if uneasy. A universe without this problem would have been as inconceivable to him as a godless universe.

It 's strange that God should fash to frame  
 The yearth and lift sae hie,  
 An' clean forget to explain the same  
 To a gentleman like me.

Thae ither folk their parritch cat  
 An' sup their sugared tea;  
 But the mind is no' to be wyled wi' meat  
 Wi' a gentleman like me.

Thae ither folk, they court their joes  
 At gloamin' on the lea;  
 But they're made of a commoner clay, I suppose,  
 Than a gentleman like me.

It's a different thing that I demand,  
 Tho' humble as can be—  
 A statement fair in my Maker's hand  
 To a gentleman like me:

A clear account writ fair an' broad,  
 An' a plain apologie;  
 Or the deevil a ceevil word to God  
 From a gentleman like me.

Landed in a scheme of things which appears to consist of 'much good, but much less good than ill', the Calvinist's consolation is still the God of his terror,

(Jehovah hear thee in the day  
 When trouble He doth send,)

and he continues to puzzle his head over the spectacle of suffering.

To some of the modern writers of 'synthetic Scots', no doubt Stevenson's excursions into dialect seem little more than mediocre variations on the most conventional of themes for village poets, destitute of technique and avoiding those moments of high emotion which they themselves seek to express. That opinion may serve for those who sincerely believe they can to-day raise Scots into the position of a European language; but for those who care more for the ethos of poetry than for umlauts and Grimm's Law, the poems are valuable simply because they help to interpret a little better the national character by telling us a little more, which could not have been told, even in his other poems, about Louis Stevenson, fragile, weary, conscience-ridden, and always superlatively brave and very much more of a true poet than critics have yet recognized. To read his poems with thought and devotion is to be admitted to moods of which we had probably not thought him capable, and to deplore, once again, the time spent on boggy-tales and pirates and accounts of the South Seas. Open his poems anywhere and you are sure to come upon some passage which you had thought familiar, but which is sure to yield something new to a fresh reading, though you will never really understand it. Take such a short poem as this:

He hears with gladdened heart the thunder  
Peal, and loves the falling dew;  
He knows the earth above and under—  
Sits and is content to view.

He sits beside the dying ember,  
God for hope and man for friend,  
Content to see, glad to remember,  
Expectant of the certain end.

What is its meaning? I do not know. What meaning has 'A slumber did my spirit seal'? Perhaps it belongs to that company; perhaps it does not. If it was handed to you as a recently discovered poem by — or —, you would make the appropriate reaction. But from Louis Stevenson? There's the rub. We know so little about the moments when his poems were made; his allusions to them are so perfunctory. We are familiar with his feelings while he was engaged on most of his prose works, for he tells us everything about them, but of the moments when a poem was born we remain for ever ignorant, and therefore, it may be, we have taken them for flimsy articles easily produced. If that is so, we have been exceedingly foolish; and the sooner we re-read and again re-read them and offer our emotions for treatment to the forms of thought and imagination which are there revealed, the better for our appreciation of all poetry.

### CHAPTER III

#### HIS FICTION

'How to get over, how to escape from the besotting *particularity* of fiction. "Roland approached the house; it had green doors and window blinds; and there was a scraper on the upper step." To hell with Roland and the scraper!'

And anxious friends beg me to stay at home and study human nature in Brompton drawing-rooms . . . I could never be induced to take the faintest interest in Brompton *qua* Brompton or a drawing-room *qua* a drawing-room. I am an epick writer with a k to it, but without the necessary genius.

R. L. S. *Letters*, vol. iv.

LIKE Ireland and the priests in the song, Stevenson offers in his works a charming variety (it has been said that this versatility is a mark of the Scots as well as of the French writer), but for the critic charm tends to dwindle as he approaches them, and the bare fact of variety provokes, rather than any appreciation, a sound of impatience over efforts wasted and time lost on return journeys from fanciful destinations to the main road of his progress. I hope, at this stage, that I may not be accused of any inconsistency in stating that the subject of this chapter affords me little enough enjoyment; for as regards *Weir* it stands apart. I would do it wrong, being so majestic, to offer it the show of enjoyment. For one solitary chapter to add to it, I would willingly sacrifice that boring book *Treasure Island* and the repulsive *Jekyll and Hyde*; no thinking person would hesitate if asked to choose between *Otto* and some newly discovered poem; for one new essay I would exchange many of the short stories, and all the fiction written in collaboration—except, I hasten to add, *The Ebb-Tide* and *The Wrecker*, though I suspect that all that I really derive from the latter is satisfaction for Scottish sentimentality in the Edinburgh episode where Loudon Dodd meets

his grandfather, that dry, grey old personality, and in the description of Loudon's emotion over the old man's death.

'I had a vision of that grey old life now brought to an end—"high time too"—a vision of those Sabbath streets alternately vacant and filled with silent people; of the babel of the bells, the long-drawn psalmody, the shrewd sting of the east wind, the hollow, echoing, dreary house to which "Ecky" had returned with the hand of death already on his shoulder; a vision, too, of the long, rough country lad, perhaps a serious courtier of the lasses in the hawthorn den, perhaps a rustic dancer on the green, who had first earned and answered to that harsh diminutive. And I asked myself if, on the whole, poor Ecky had succeeded in life; if the last state of that man were not on the whole worse than the first; and the house in Randolph Crescent, a less admirable dwelling than the hamlet where he saw the day and grew to mankind.'

A little sentimental, no doubt, as becomes what is written by the Scot in exile, but a direct emotional development from the days of youth, when his eyes had been open to receive suggestions in every street and he could have felt himself, like Keats, one with the sparrow pecking outside the window; and it speaks of potential creation never realized and makes us wonder what great hopes for the Scottish novel that should be more than a transcript from her romantic past were buried in the grave on Mount Vaea. It comes from the heart, which is more than can be said of *Kidnapped* and *Catriona*, the dedications to which are the only signs of real art about them, in so far as these consist of genuine emotion clothed in lovely words.

'I see like a vision the youth of my father, and of his father, and the whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north, with the sound of laughter and tears, to cast me out in the end, as by a sudden freshet, on these ultimate islands. And I admire and bow my head before the romance of destiny.'

A sentence or two such as that yields to the loyal Stevensonian an excitement and a magic far beyond anything to be extracted from the laborious period writing of the novel itself. Even the emptiness of the sentiment 'I bow my head before the romance of destiny' is welcomed, although it probably takes a Scot to appreciate the Presbyterianism of that touch of fine phraseology, signifying nothing, and yet, when Stevenson employs it, wearing its emptiness much more nobly. In the same dedication—the whole body of his dedications is in itself worthy of a pamphlet—he speaks of some young man who may walk through the environs of Edinburgh, where he had walked with Charles Baxter, and may 'weigh with surprise his momentous and nugatory gift of life', and once again the splendour of the phrase startles us into realizing that a whole volume of poetry has been packed into ten words.

Doubtless, this is very wrong, that a writer should obtain no more gratitude who, probably beyond all his contemporaries, toiled and laboured, rejected and revised, in order to present us with a novel, with two novels, which no reader can deny to be pieces of most cunning workmanship of which any artificer might be proud, involving all the difficulties of the tale told in the first person and necessitating the assumption of a whole frame of mind and turn of diction which it must have cost perpetual effort to maintain. We look coldly at what, technically speaking, is crammed with good things and own that we prefer a few rather self-conscious sentences in which the author commends his work to a friend as a part memorial of their youth; and there we have our answer. It is for the self-consciousness and the personal sentences, and not for the technique, that we read our Stevenson. It is not a good enough answer, and even as we make it, our minds rebel and we confess the wrong we have done him. But it is

because we know that he could achieve the highest technique, where personal and impersonal are one, that we refuse to accept his voluntary imprisonment in the artifice of *Kidnapped* as the highest of which he was capable. It is for the sake of the one fragment in which the construction and order of the earlier works are inextricably linked with the grace and the humanity and warmth of what he wrote from the heart, that we tolerate the noise of the machine. Sometimes, to be sure, it is a very good and useful machine. I do not propose to surrender, for any of the hypothetical manuscripts I have already mentioned, the distinguished ugliness of *The Master of Ballantrae*, even if I sometimes deplore the stilted affectation of antiquity which mars the type of peculiarly Scottish novel descended from it and from *Kidnapped*. The old lady with sarcastic tongue, the infuriating heroine with proud and gallantly boyish bearing, the inevitably douce and canny old family servant, the pedantic dominie or minister, and all the other members of the caravan—how wearisome they are! I never meet that ‘shrewd, portly, ruddy, notable’ old lawyer, Mr. Rankeillour, in *Kidnapped* without a murderous impulse arising in me. I can imagine Stevenson’s delight in his choice of just those epithets, and they came from his pen with a smugness which his higher inspiration would soon have driven out of doors. It was the same quality which made him delight in the machinery of the prologue to *The Master of Ballantrae* with its elaborate pretence of verisimilitude and documents discovered. This may be either the child’s play instinct or some quality of constructiveness to be discovered in artists who are descended from a family of civil engineers, but whatever it is, it leads to waste of time. Neil Munro could manage the antiquarian business with a better grace (but with no nearer an approach to life) because he possessed that Highland blood which Stevenson



longed in vain to claim, and therefore his eloquence was not merely that of the pulpit; and it was managed by John Buchan with admirable skill in his earlier days, although, sincere Presbyterian that he is, as soon as he saw the true face of art, he had to flee. Stevenson himself hit off the type very nearly in his own analysis of *St. Ives*.

‘It is a mere tissue of adventures; the central figure not very well or very sharply drawn; no philosophy, no destiny, to it; some of the happenings very good in themselves, I believe, but none of them *bildende*, none of them constructive, except in so far perhaps as they make up a kind of sham picture of the time, all in italics and all out of drawing.’

And so on down to the ladylike romances of newer writers, who love to tell us what their young gallants talk about while shaving. One hardly knows which is more deplorable, the acceptance of technique as an end in itself, or the zeal of the attempts to revive and prettify the past. There the Scot gladly takes refuge because his own present humiliation in a subject country is intolerable and rendered more so by the fact that any novels on contemporary life which it produces are so plainly infected with the spirit that cannot admire—something akin to the Master of Ballantrae’s ‘malady of not wanting’.

Must the Scot always do better when he writes of the past? Are not *A Lost Lady of Old Years* and *Midwinter* and that fine short story, *Companions of the Marjolaine*, a hundred times more creditable to John Buchan’s real talent than his tales of modern adventure, all vitiated with that easy acceptance of conventional values which makes the Scotsman so fatally ready to believe the victorious must be the better cause?

It is easy, however, to be unfair. The story of *Kidnapped* would be written in another fashion if some clever person wrote it to-day, and would be disfigured by a great deal

of dark, specious masculinity. It would be none the better, and if I seem to overlook its virtues, it is because I cannot look at any of Stevenson's novels and forget *Weir*; which is foolish, since *Weir* is a tragedy, and there is no suffering in *Kidnapped* or *Catriona*. But to see the writer of tragedy devoting the months of laborious diligence which he bestowed on every book to the job of reconstructing an eighteenth-century adventure as seen through nineteenth-century eyes—the kind of imaginative effort nowadays required of an intelligent Fourth Form—is a trial to one's patience. Nevertheless, we must stop to shed from our minds everything acquired from good novels since 1886, divesting ourselves of *Sinister Street* and *Brave New World*, *Clayhanger* and *Jacob's Room*, and recall the world to which *Kidnapped* came as a refreshing novelty. Stevenson used to become very indignant about novels dealing with perpetual tea-parties attended by curates; but this happened more frequently during the years at Bournemouth than at any other time, and perhaps the air of Bournemouth is favourable to tea-parties and inimical to adventure, even as the feverishness of consumption welcomes it. Although the whole theme of one of his best essays, *The Lantern Bearers*, is that the dullest curate at the most boring tea-party may all the while secretly hear a bird singing in his heart, he would never have accepted that truth as a subject for fiction. For one thing, the time was not ripe for it. A quarter of a century had to pass before *Clayhanger* could be written, a masterpiece in comparison with which *Kidnapped* is merely the experiment of a clever boy still anxious to avoid grappling with adult problems. Make every allowance for Edwin when you meet him in daily life, Stevenson would have preached; remember how deep and sacred his inward joy may be, though the dust lies thick on his outer life. But choose him for hero—no, never,

never, so long as there are men who sail ships and climb mountains and are bonny fighters. During that period covered by the second volume of the letters, Stevenson was hectically obsessed by adventure, and after all, it was the period when he was most secluded from all simple intercourse with the world of healthy men. It was during those years that he begged Henry James to make some experiment in adding adventure to his repertory.

‘Of course, I am not so dull as to ask you to desert your walk; but could you not, in one novel, to oblige a sincere admirer, and to enrich his shelves with a beloved volume, could you not, and might you not, cast your characters in a mould a little more abstract and academic (dear Mrs. Pennyman had already, among your other work, a taste of what I mean), and pitch the incidents, I do not say in any stronger, but in a slightly more emphatic key—as it were an episode from one of the old (so-called) novels of adventure? I fear you will not and I suppose I must sighingly admit you to be right. And yet, when I see, as it were, a book of Tom Jones handled with your exquisite precision and shot through with those side-lights of reflection in which you excel, I relinquish the dear vision with regret.’

The time was not ripe for anything else, and if, as Stevenson himself wrote, you superimpose psychology upon adventure, you may at any time offend two classes of reader. In the eighties England lay in the backwash of that tide of emotion which caused the great Victorians to shed so many tears over Dickens, and *Enoch Arden*, and *Misunderstood*. The novel was no longer taken quite as seriously as when Henry Sidgwick read *Richard Feverel* with an ‘intense’ feeling of pain, his mind ‘aching’ at passages, when he grew ‘stifled’ and had to stop reading, because it was ‘terrible’ to him that Meredith should feel as a poet and stand aside as a showman. Fiction was being reduced to a lesser scale. Things were not as tremendous as in the days when Trollope created ‘true life, pure women, wholesome

families and men of sterling honour and sound sense'. Life in the three volumes had come down to the curate and tea-party effect, and a plain straightforward story of adventure in the Highlands, completely lacking a love interest, was a startling innovation. Its readers must have felt as pleasantly excited as those whom Andrew Lang described as returning joyfully from 'shadows of wan lovers' to 'the surge and thunder of the Odyssey'.

Apart from *Weir*, I take Stevenson's finest novel to be *The Master of Ballantrae*, next to which, greatly daring since both are collaborations, I place *The Ebb-Tide* and *The Wrecker*, followed by *The New Arabian Nights*. From the short stories I choose *The Pavilion on the Links*, *Thrawn Janet*, *Will o' the Mill*, *The Treasure of Franchard*, and *Providence and the Guitar*. Most of these I read with little feeling of pleasure, but I could never deny that the artist had succeeded. The exceptions, most unfortunately, include two books which are not his individual work; but I think any reader who has come to some understanding of his author's idiom and temperament can separate the composition and extract the Stevenson element.

I well remember the thrill with which, at the age of eighteen or so, I identified as Stevenson's a passage from *The Wrecker* quoted without any helpful allusion in some schoolbook; and this goes to prove that collaboration never quenched the light. And so I hope to be forgiven for placing *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide* very high indeed among his novels. Without underrating his fellow writer, I would suggest that he supplied certain vivid, contemporary, snap-shot effects, whose limited actuality shines out the more because its background owes its sense of tragedy and its cadence and rhythm to the experience of an older man and a great artist. Among the writings of his exile, they best demonstrate Stevenson's extraordinary power

of quickly selecting from each of his various changing environments some element which he could and would describe, or some type of man whom he could set in a story. But each book, even the one in which the scene never shifts from the Pacific, contains something treasured from the 'wild and bitterly unhappy' days of his youth. I have alluded to that striking glimpse of old Alexander Dodd's grey life, and every one knows how faithfully the art-student life in Paris is based upon Stevenson's own happy experience there—'on a part of our life's map there lies a roseate, undecipherable haze, and that is all'; but in *The Ebb-Tide* many may not pause over the fact that Captain Davis, in his vision of a respected and peaceful old age, sees himself living in a house named *Rosemore*. ('I am one of the few persons in the world who do not forget their own lives.' *Rosemore* was the name of the house at Dunoon where he had been taken for a holiday as a very small child. He revisited it, in a positive ecstasy of emotion, at the age of nineteen or twenty, when nominally learning how piers are built.) This touch is companion to the fact that in *The Wrecker* some one has to sing *My Boy Tammie*, a song which Thomas Stevenson had been particularly fond of singing or whistling. And if one reads, with the first volume of the letters to hand, some of the passages in which Herrick looks back from the bitterness of failure to pleasures enjoyed at home, there seems to burst upon one a sudden passionate gale from youth, which sends flying before and in its wake just that medley, scraps of quotation, the first sudden glorious shock of encounter with some masterpiece, boundless ambition, abject despair, which is youth remembered. The Fifth Symphony . . . Vergil . . . *Einst, O wunder* . . . *Nemorosa Zacynthos* . . . those obvious cultural tags which aroused, as can be read in the letters, such enthusiasm in the youthful Louis and apparently played so

lowly a part in the equipment of the successful writer, are all packed into the emptiness of Herrick's apparently wasted life with a passion which is almost 'fey'. Here and there, also, occur passages of his prose at its most characteristic rhythm, earnest as a sermon, poignant as an epitaph, so full of the tears of things that no one need wonder at the rapture which marked his belated discovery of Vergil.

'He knew that in his love's heart the context (i.e. of their hearing a song) would spring up, escorted with fair images and harmony; of how all through life her name should tremble in his ears, her name be everywhere repeated in the sounds of nature; and when death came, and he lay dissolved, her memory lingered and thrilled among his elements.'

(An echo of Archie Weir's thoughts on death as he goes, unknowing, to meet his fate.)

'He had dug his grave that morning; now he had carved his epitaph; the folds of the toga were composed, why did he delay the insignificant trifle that remained to do?'

Lastly, in the conclusion of the account of Herrick's attempted suicide, we have a strange reminiscence of the girding and carrying phrase used of the dying grave-digger in 'Old Mortality':

'Why should he delay? Here, where he was now, let him drop the curtain, let him seek the ineffable refuge, let him lie down with all races and generations of men in the house of sleep. . . . To any man there may come at times a consciousness that there blows, through all the articulations of his body, the mind of a spirit not wholly his; that his mind rebels; that another girds and carries him whither he would not.'

Such passages are not superficial decoration to a gloomy story; they are in direct descent from the letters illustrating the development of a great artist in a young man whose wedding and funeral took place on the one day. The seed was sown years before, half a world away from Samoa, and when life there brought sufficient knowledge of new types

of character, mostly sordid, the essential greatness, nearly come to the moment of winning its own freedom, was able to enfold the sordid adventurers within its own intensity. Never since the first wonder of youth had died, had Stevenson been so content to be passive, to be girded and carried. This was very far from the invalid, house-bound frame of mind in which *Kidnapped* had been written, and with *The Ebb-Tide* we are well on the road to *Weir*. Davis and 'Mr. Whish' may be sometimes somewhat stagey, and that monster Attwater might have been explained a little more; but Herrick is the hero of the book, and his remorse, his self-loathing, and the longing for death with which he sees the squall beating down on the *Farallone* are magnificently rendered. *The Wrecker* certainly has a wider field, variety of atmosphere, flashes of humour, and altogether a wild buoyancy and freshness; but it does not leave us much the wiser about Stevenson, while *The Ebb-Tide*, even when we have made every allowance for collaboration, comes from the heart and is far greater, more spontaneous, more, though I deprecate the word, poetic, than any of his previous works. He classified *The Wrecker* as a 'machine' or 'thriller'; but elsewhere, with a disheartening glimpse of the old heresy, he enlarges on it as being less a book than 'a long tough yarn with some pictures of the manners of to-day in the greater world—not the shoddy sham world of cities, clubs, and colleges, but the world where men still live a man's life'. *The Ebb-Tide* he must always have recognized as a novel of greater scope than that, to which every strain and surprise in his own inner development contributed. It was certainly a milestone on the road to a freedom in creation and an independence from which, probably in full consciousness, for he was never deceived when he regarded his own motives, he had sought shelter in the safe

adventures of David Balfour. It is a tragedy of higher rank than the *Master*, for that boasts a hero far too determined to prove a villain to satisfy Aristotle.

'The Master is all I know of the devil. I have known hints of him, in the world, but always cowards; he is as bold as a lion, but with the same deadly, causeless duplicity I have watched with so much surprise in my two cowards. 'Tis true, I saw a hint of the same nature in another man who was not a coward, but he had other things to attend to; the Master has nothing else but his devilry.'

Too villainous he may be, too 'plausible', to use the word which Stevenson bestowed so freely, almost joyfully, upon his scoundrels, but we are made to feel the romantic quality which drew from the admiring Mackellar, that spiritual 'old maid', the epithet 'beautiful'. Mackellar, dry, sedate, even in youth prematurely elderly, half unwillingly drinks in heat and light from this inescapable Lucifer, even as the invalid of the restricted life and the Covenanting conscience had thirsted, from childhood, for the romance of those unknown sinners with whom Lou was not allowed to play. But like Iago, he can come very near to being unconvincing as an individual, though as an incarnation of wickedness he stands high. Indeed, we are almost conscious of an incongruity when he drops to the merely human, as when he sings, 'Home no more home to me', as he starts with Mackellar on the first stage of the journey from Durrisdeer.

The price which we have to pay for a story told in the first person is always high, and when we consider the strain imposed on Stevenson by writing in 'Mackellarese' and begin to realize the effort it must have cost him, we cannot but wonder why this eighteenth-century idiom exercised so strong an attraction on him. The attraction persisted; even in *In the South Seas*, among descriptions written in



'Stevensonese', such an expression will crop out as 'I own I was inspired with sensible repugnance'. Certainly, by making Mackellar the narrator he was able to bring out the full darkness of such passages as that in which the prim, grey steward prays, on the voyage, that his own life may go also, if he succeed in killing the Master, so long as the innocent are saved, and is thanked by the captain for having prayed for fair weather; or that later passage, in which he witnesses Henry Durie's drunken triumph at the thought of revenging himself upon his brother, listens to him singing 'The Twa Corbies', and continues the story in his sober and pedantic idiom, whose power of calmly conveying the ugly scene repays close study.

'I have said there was no music in the man. His strains had no logical succession except in so far as they inclined a little to the minor mode; but they exercised a rude potency upon the feelings, and followed the words, and signified the feelings of the singer with barbaric fitness. He took it first in the time and manner of a rant; presently this ill-favoured gleefulness abated, he began to dwell upon the notes more feelingly, and sank at last into a degree of maudlin pathos that was to me scarce bearable. By equal steps, the original briskness of his acts declined; and when he was stripped to his breeches, he sat on the bedside and fell to whimpering. I know nothing less respectable than the tears of drunkenness, and turned my back impatiently on this poor sight.

'But he had started himself (I am to suppose) on that slippery descent of self-pity; on the which, to a man unstrung by old sorrows and recent potations, there is no arrest except exhaustion. His tears continued to flow, and the man to sit there, three parts naked, in the cold air of the chamber. I twitted myself alternately with inhumanity and sentimental weakness, now half rising in my bed to interfere, now reading myself lessons of indifference and courting slumber, until, upon a sudden, the *quantum mutatus ab illo* shot into my mind; and calling to remembrance his old wisdom, constancy and patience, I was overborne with a pity almost approaching the passionate, not for my master alone but for the sons of man.'

Against such gains, which are very great, we may set the loss which the method enforces when scenes in the hall of Durrisdeer are to be described. Then the old lord, reading his Latin by the fire, Mrs. Henry at her embroidery, and Henry himself pacing up and down, tend to remain—must inevitably remain—shadowy figures. Only Mackellar himself and the Master come alive; but they are as striking a pair of characters as Stevenson ever drew, for the repressed passions of the one and the villainy of the other are on a far grander scale than the hollow picturesqueness of Alan Breck Stewart or the limited canniness of David Balfour. Considering, indeed, how rarely Stevenson succeeded in drawing a character, with what delicate care he could assemble a background, a few episodes, a trick of speech, and yet entirely miss both heart and soul, we may safely say that, apart from the human beings in *Weir*, the Master and Mackellar are the only truly convincing persons whom he ever created; and even then they are first and foremost personifications, just as Herrick is failure rather than Herrick, an amalgamation of grim and touching details, masterly in the setting of a book, but not capable of moving very far out of its book.

Although *The New Arabian Nights* is a joyless work, it is not to be regarded, like *Prince Otto* and *Treasure Island* and *A Child's Garden*, as so much waste of Stevenson's time. Like them it represents a challenge, a resolution to see what he could do, rather than the working-out of an idea which had already gripped him. 'Ideas' mattered scarcely at all to Stevenson. As Henry James pointed out, it was never the 'idea' or the 'subject' of a new novel which presented itself to him. The names of the characters and the titles of chapters went down on paper suddenly. Episodes flashed into his mind and an ecstasy of incident-worship seized upon him; he seemed entirely oblivious

of the connexion between incident and the processes which are

... permanent, obscure and dark  
And share the nature of infinity.

Sheer Calvinism, of course, this depreciation of the importance (not the solemnity) of character, this avoidance of psychology, this mistrust of seeing fallible humanity too radiantly adorned with the halo of perfectibility. 'But who are we', asked Archie Weir, still tortured by his father's method of dealing with crime, 'to know all the springs of God's unfortunate creatures? Who are we to trust ourselves where it seems that God Himself must think twice before He treads, and to do it with delight?' And this is more than a mere exhortation to forbear from judging; it is the Calvinist's warning to the whole tribe of psychological novelists. In one of Stevenson's early poems we have this dilemma summed up:

The creatures will not let me see  
The great Creator of them all.

Here is the difficulty confronting the novelist—how obsolete the phrases sound in this humanistic age—who cannot agree to accept a President of the Immortals or a Great Juggler or a Life Force or any other *Ersatz*-religion, for whom there is no First Cause except the God of Bethel. While working in chastened dependence upon such a God, the writer who has absorbed Calvinism in his youth dare not let his puppets be too exalted. Stevenson's first attempts at fiction were hampered not only by the 'How much *can* I do?' attitude, but also by the thought of 'How much *ought* I to do?' In the long run, however, it was because he became not less but more Presbyterian that he was able to write *Weir*. He had outlived youth's rebellion against ministers, had come to see them in truer perspective, and could cry with conviction from his own bitter

experience never revealed, 'Thou of the vast designs in which we blindly labour . . .'. And those who do not agree had better study his poems more deeply.

And then, let it never be forgotten that the only child never comes—or comes much later than others—to a true understanding of human personality. His early ideas of it are formed from books, or from the forced playfulness or deliberate condescending companionship of older people, and not from ordinary daily and hourly beholding of or participating in the faults and happiness of those of equal capacity with himself. And with Stevenson, between illness and his father's convenient, very un-Scottish habit of depreciating formal education, there was not even the factor of continuous school life. To be ignorant, at the age of six or seven, of any reasons for other children's tempers, or any inspiration for their fantasy, or any menace from their criticism, is not likely to lead to a conventional estimation of human beings when one is thirty. What should have been unconsciously absorbed into an immature mind has to be consciously acquired, and meanwhile the mental faculties have raced ahead. Solitariness becomes ingrained, until

. . . wealth I seek not, hope nor love,  
Nor a friend to know me,

becomes no idle boast, and to 'pass, a wilful stranger', the settlements of other men linked by unimaginable ties is the habitual lot of every day.

For these two reasons then one must bear in mind, when judging an early book like *The New Arabian Nights*, the point of Stevenson's development which they represent. It may be true, as the late Lord Oxford wrote of the book, that he 'left no exact successor' in that type of writing', but the criticism goes on to add 'there is no doubt that one is conscious all the time of a machine very skilfully and

deftly worked'. They do indeed represent a stage in the 'learning to write' process, as distinct from that of 'being an author', but the fact that a story as much finer as *Will o' the Mill* was written at the same time, proves that learning to 'be an author' was not forgotten. *Will o' the Mill* has everything that *The New Arabian Nights* completely lacks; style, imagination, a depth of feeling, a certain effect of patient musing which relates it to passages in the letters which make up the tale of self-development; but the adventures of Prince Florizel offer us nothing but a cold proficiency in the art of plain straightforward narration, which is certainly admirable but awakens no pleasure in the reader. Like a number of Stevenson's later books, the stories fail to suggest any pleasure, any obsession, any enthusiasm kindled in his own mind, and the reader, especially if the reader also really knows the poems and the essays, is left impatiently wondering what made him want to write the book at all. The only relief to the dead level of disenraptured competence comes when the mocking and satiric Stevenson who later wrote *Moral Emblems* makes an intrusion; then we have such touches as the complaint of the Reverend Simon Rolles:

'Here am I, with learning enough to be a Bishop, and I positively do not know how to dispose of a stolen diamond. I glean a hint from a common policeman, and, with all my folios, I cannot so much as put it into execution. This inspires me with very low ideas of University training.'

Or he may write, with tongue in cheek, the description of Francis Scrymgeour:

'Francis Scrymgeour, a clerk in the Bank of Scotland at Edinburgh, had attained the age of twenty-five in a sphere of quiet, creditable, and domestic life. His mother died while he was young; but his father, a man of sense and probity, had given him an excellent education at school, and brought him up at home to orderly and frugal habits. Francis, who was of

a docile and affectionate disposition, profited by these advantages with zeal, and devoted himself heart and soul to his employment. A walk upon Saturday afternoon, an occasional dinner with members of his family, and a yearly tour of a fortnight in the Highlands or even on the continent of Europe, were his principal distractions, and he grew rapidly in favour with his superiors, and enjoyed already a salary of nearly two hundred pounds a year, with the prospect of an ultimate advance to almost double that amount. Few young men were more contented, few more willing and laborious than Francis Scrymgeour. Sometimes at night, when he had read the daily paper, he would play upon the flute to amuse his father, for whose qualities he entertained a great respect.'

Or finally, in the person of Florizel, he may indulge in a little moralizing before flinging the diamond into the river; but when all is written, he has succeeded only in producing a number of fantastic short stories very well told, which, nevertheless, must be placed high among his work because they prove that the groundwork of his art was there in the years before his marriage, and speak of a characteristic slightly obscured in his early travel books—those 'somber tastes' which he shared with Mr. Salteena's friend Bernard.

*The Pavilion on the Links* displays the same cheerless ability. Considered as narrative, it is excellent; there is nothing structurally wrong about it—entirely the reverse—but it has some dismal clockwork where its heart should be. Although written at the outset of that fatal visit to America, it has no need to ask for pity or excuse, for *The New Arabian Nights* had already proved what workmanship he could produce without the slightest inward and emotional assent. Such stories as *The Merry Men* and *Markheim* are more ambitious, but I do not think they are noticeably more successful. They contain far more of himself and his own conflicts, but they aim at something he

was not yet able to achieve, or could achieve equally well in other forms, whereas the stories which seem to be mere machinery are at any rate finished machinery.

A very interesting specimen of his earlier work is that story of Renaissance Italy, *When the Devil was well*, written in 1875 while he was still gloomily studying for the Bar, and mentioned in letters with such enthusiasm. Perhaps the field of the short story was then even more restricted than we imagine; but on examining the story we find, beyond this sheer ability for plain narrative, none of the elements we might expect from a young man, neither beauty nor impropriety nor cleverness—he was not, even at that age, ‘clever’ in a literary sense—nor adventure. And yet we know from the letters that to write it brought him a sense of joy and freedom and escape from the greyness of Edinburgh, and affected him emotionally. ‘O cursed stories, they will never affect anyone but me, I fear’ is the conclusion of a letter of that time to Sidney Colvin, and that is exactly what the reader fears also. Some repressive influence, fear of attempting what he had not experienced, shyness, reticence, kept him from drawing anywhere near the real heart of his subject, so that we fail to receive any deep impression of Sanazarro’s joy in his own artistic performances or in his love of the Duchess. In his anxiety to tell a story clearly, Stevenson swept away the slightest trace of that voluptuous detail with which such a writer as Shorthouse would have embellished the Italian background; and the most Stevensonian touch is the sarcasm contained in the Duke’s various promises of amended conduct in the event of the Jordan water restoring him to health.

There is a world of difference between any of these stories and *Providence and the Guitar* or *The Treasure of Franchard*. Art, even the art of the unsuccessful strolling

player, was a subject which brought out the best of Stevenson's workmanship as piracy could never bring it out. Léon Berthelini, the hero of the guitar story, is a far more Stevensonian character than Alan Breck, and his cry of 'Art is Art. It is not water-colour sketches, nor practising on a piano. It is a life to be lived', is what Stevenson was meant to prove. The whole law of his nature tended to this, and the lightness, humour, and airiness of *Providence and the Guitar* only make us lament more bitterly the time wasted in worshipping action and incident. All the best that the artist life at Fontainebleau contained of mirth and constructive power went into this one short story. From that life, too, came the mood which dictated *The Treasure of Franchard* with its lesson that wealth can buy only a life which may corrupt and destroy the finer and simpler emotions nourished in a contented obscurity. But youth died. 'All that was good, all that was fair. . . .' The outward affairs of the married man usurped the place of the strange hidden self, and the promising alliance of a Calvinistic groundwork and a French elevation was left incomplete until the part author of *The Wrecker* wrote a chapter or two which revealed the enduring charm of the neglected edifice.

It is hard to decide whether *Prince Otto* or *The Black Arrow* is Stevenson's greatest failure, but I think the more ambitious story wins, for we know how he regarded the 'tushery' of the latter. *Otto*, on the other hand, cost him more work than any other novel he wrote; and when we stop to count up and estimate in terms of time and fatigue the full content of the references in the letters to its laborious composition, as well as the number of years during which the idea of the book was present with him, we are left wondering what element in its tedious artificiality he so dearly prized, and what clash of character and circum-



stance challenged his imagination so persistently. It was more a stubborn attempt to prove that style and technique are marketable and can be purchased and thrust upon the personal decorations of the spirit's individual home. His power of standing apart from his work and judging it was so remarkable that he must have known he was no Meredith to attitudinize over the minute coffin of a still-born passion. Picture a Meredith whose Seraphina, falling asleep after her flight through the forest, could be 'taken home a little, from all her toils and sorrows, to her Father's arms'. No, the text of his sermon is Otto's 'I understand how the brave woman must look down on the weak man', and the impulse which he kept for so many years in one of imagination's hiding-places was the impulse to take it out of himself for having been weak in the past, for having endured the love-making of the Russian vampire at Mentone, for having married, for being pleased by a 'warm atmosphere of women and flattery and idle chatter'; for being 'Hamlet most of all', until the peasant girl was driven to wonder at Prince Otto-Louis's passivity and inaction, even as Nance Holdaway of *The Great North Road* wondered at and admonished her Mr. Archer. (Henley, no doubt, exaggerated the Hamlet touch. Stevenson was no more Hamlet than is any other sensitive, gentle, and imaginative person who can clearly see and dissect his own emotions, who feels that such fellows as he have little business crawling between heaven and earth, and bears misfortune with a courage largely born of consideration for others as distinct from mere stoicism.)

Even before he began *Kidnapped* Stevenson had given some evidence of power to write something more than stories of adventure when he began *The Great North Road*. It is not the most attractive of those pathetic fragments of novels which have come down to us, chiefly because its

English setting hampered him and put a bridle in the mouths of his characters, both lords and peasants. Their talk is stilted and lifeless, their characterization uncertain, because they were foreigners; but the tedium of the story would obviously have been redeemed by the author's insight into the character of Nance Holdaway, awakened to life by her devotion to the silent, melancholy, vacillating Mr. Archer. Nance is no forerunner of Christina Elliott, for she is grave, sober, steadfast, maternal in her affection, but the steps of the inward transformation are drawn with the same insight that knew what passed in Christina's shallower mind.

'And then there burst upon her soul a divine thought, hope's glorious sunrise: since she could understand, since it seemed that she too, even she, could interest this sorrowful Apollo, might she not learn? or was she not learning? Would not her soul awake and put forth wings? Was she not, in fact, an enchanted princess, waiting but a touch to become royal? She saw herself transformed, radiantly attired, but in the most exquisite taste, and she heard herself with delighted wonder talking like a book. . . . She saw herself, in a brave attitude, shielding her imperfect hero from the world; and she saw, like a piece of heaven, his gratitude for her protection.'

In the fragment of *The Young Chevalier*, which in its more rhetorical manner gave promise of a better story, he loses no time in preface, but hastens immediately into an analysis of Marie-Madeleine's love for Balmile. As she watched him talking in her husband's wine-shop,

' . . . she tried to conceive what manner of memory had thus entranced him; she forged for him a past; she showed him to herself in every light of heroism and greatness and misfortune; she brooded with petulant intensity on all she knew and guessed of him . . . her thoughts were still disinterested; she had still to reach the stage at which beside the image of that other whom we love to contemplate and adorn we place the image of ourself and behold them together with delight. . . . The world of

living persons was all resumed again with one pair, as in the days of Eden; there was but the one end in life, the one hope before her, the one thing needful, the one thing possible, to be his.'

This from the connoisseur in pirates and highwaymen, the exponent of the fantastic, means a good deal. He was much in love with the scheme of *The Young Chevalier*. (Marie-Madeleine, it should be remembered, was merely intended to be 'prologuial' to the meeting and love of Charles Edward and the real heroine.)

'I am afraid', he wrote of it, 'my touch is a little broad in a love story; I can't mean one thing and write another. As for women, I am no more in any fear of them; I can do a sort all right, age makes me less afraid of a petticoat, but I am a little in fear of grossness . . . with all my romance, I am a realist and a prosaist, and a most fanatical lover of plain physical sensations plainly and expressly rendered. . . . To do love in the same spirit as I did (for instance) D. Balfour's fatigue in the heather; my dear sir, there were grossness—ready made!'

But the writer of to-day 'does love' in a spirit which makes David's journey across the heather as tame and limited an affair as a short Sunday afternoon stroll in Kensington Gardens.

But at last we are able to leave all these behind and turn to the half-written book before which all the apparatus of modern criticism is useless. *Weir* would be a very disappointing find to the reviewer who thinks that criticism consists in running up a scaffolding whose several pieces are marked 'compensation', or 'escape', or 'fixation', or 'fantasy' (or perhaps, if considering Stevenson, 'Calvinism' or 'tuberculosis'), and then, perched on its height, delivering a few superficial blows upon the fabric of a classic and saying the job is done. Hitherto Stevenson had very rarely succeeded in fusing the inner experiences revealed in the poems with his technical command of prose style and

narrative. Only a few passages in the essays and the few touches in *The Ebb-Tide* which have been mentioned reveal such an integrity. The artistic achievement in *Weir* should not surprise any one who has seriously studied the poems, but such are too few; for the poems, so perfunctorily mentioned by their author, contain the story of experience which had never been successfully adapted to any prose form until, at the end, freedom came. The whole question of the relation between Stevenson's poems and his novels reminds one of the statement in one of Roger Fry's essays, that 'it is one of the curiosities of the psychology of the artist that he is generally trying very hard to do something which has nothing to do with what he actually accomplishes; that the fundamental quality of his work seems to come out unconsciously as a by-product of his conscious activity'.

I suppose I am not the only admirer of *Weir* who has occasionally found it impossible to read the book. I have taken it off the shelf, hesitated, replaced it, recalled Keats's

Such dim conceivèd glories of the brain  
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud.

The psychologist may pleasantly label my action as a particularly sensuous form of self-denial, but that cannot be the whole secret. Or it might be self-mistrust, the suspicion that what I first read at seventeen, when I was as solitary as Stevenson at the same age, appealed to some susceptibility which years and politics and the increasing standardization of life have stunted; the dread that each successive reading of the book has happened to fall at some extraordinarily happy moment when, according to the Cambridge school of critics, my nerves and digestion were in a state of physiological well-being, or when some very personal incident had lent its radiance to everything. But this time, my craven scruple would suggest, you can

hardly hope for the same glory. You have caught a cold, and the Government is all for rearmament, and what about the Means Test? You have been badly misunderstood by some one or other. These things produce, it may be, a certain amount of level-headedness. Try your masterpiece now, see if it has any power to tease you out of thought. The glory was in you and a mere effervescence, not the true stuff, and not in that handful of chapters which you over-estimated. The next time, however, you did read it, perhaps not much of it, beginning with the dedication (which his wife found pinned to the bed-curtain one day—he had engaging habits like that), noting its humility and the touch of weariness in its sinking cadence, and remembering how very low his confidence in his own powers and achievement had been dwindling towards the end of his life, glancing on perhaps to the final sentence, dictated a few hours before his death. The sword of a very brave man is here, brought back from the last of many battles; it is a manuscript worthy to be near those writings which lay in the Antarctic silence beside the bodies of Scott and his comrades. What you had feared was not so much anything incidental to *Weir* itself as the other glory, that which the book awoke in you, and the intimacy of your own reaction. It is more probable that you will make some fresh discovery of the book's power than that you will be forced to turn away in disappointment. For example, when I last dared to read some part of it, I think I realized quite freshly and differently the full content of the chapter which described Archie's reception, after the scene with his father, by his old friend and counsellor, Lord Glenalmond. It is a chapter scarcely easier to read than the account of the actual clash between father and son, where it is hard to say who is being most pitilessly dissected, Archie Weir, or Louis Stevenson as he had been at Archie's age, or the mere

reader, who soon finds that the immunity of a critic avails him nothing, so inexorably is he forced into one of these other two beings. The verse which Stevenson wrote on the personal reminiscences contained in *Memories and Portraits* applies here with painful force.

Much of my soul is here interred,  
My very past and mind;  
Who listens nearly to the printed word  
May hear the heart behind.

What struck one afresh in that chapter on the midnight talk in Glenalmond's dining-room was the depth and the loyalty of Archie's devotion to Hermiston, who had handled him so roughly, though scarcely cruelly. One critic at least has given it as his opinion that the real heart of the book is not to be found in the love story of Archie and Christina, but in the relationship of father and son, and this chapter, even more than the preceding one, goes far to proving him right. 'He struck me as something very big. Yes, he is big. He never spoke about himself; only about me. I suppose I admired him. . . . I know he will never ask me anything unjust.' That goes home more surely than any of the observations, shrewd and sensitive as they are, on Archie's feelings for the pretty little minx whose Glasgow clothes made 'an effect like sunshine' in the little grey kirk.

'My father and I together can put about a year through in half an hour. Look here, you mustn't take this too much to heart. It's impossible to depress me.'

He had no Glenalmond to whom he could escape from Heriot Row in the crucial autumn of 1872. I suppose I must, in fairness, allow that Fleeming Jenkin existed, but I am afraid that when I read the passages in the letters on the death of Jenkin, or the memoir, from which he seems to me to emerge as a very trying specimen of the cheerful and

virtuous Victorian agnostic, an exceptionally uninspiring member of the spiritual family of T. H. Green, I cannot help knowing that Stevenson was by far the greater man of the two. He could only retreat to his room and write thus to Mrs. Sitwell, not, we may be sure, without tears; and then lie awake next morning wondering if his father would whistle as usual on coming in from an early walk, and notice with a fresh pang, that there was, as the current idiom of to-day has it, definitely no whistle. From a study of the letters of that time, which admit us almost farther than we feel to be fair, we may assume that Archie's devotion was created to satisfy some old feeling of remorse, though conscience must have exaggerated, for it is impossible that at any time Thomas Stevenson would have received a lesser tribute than Hermiston received from a son essentially generous and extraordinarily ready to admire.

We know also from the letters what trouble Stevenson had been taking to ascertain how far the law would allow it to be possible for Hermiston to be actually concerned in the trial where Archie should be condemned to death; so the critic who sees the book as mainly a study of filial relations is most probably right. For myself, I do not feel quite certain about the escape to America which, according to what we are told of Stevenson's plans for the later chapters, was to be the fate of Archie and Christina. In the introduction, he speaks of the tale being yet told of 'young Hermiston that vanished from men's knowledge'; and, more significant still, in that passage of rare insight which describes the fluctuations of Christina's nature a few hours after the glance exchanged with Archie in the kirk, we read:

'Had a doctor of medicine come into that loft, he would have diagnosed a healthy, well-developed, eminently vivacious lass lying on her face in a fit of the sulks; not one who had just

contracted, or was just contracting, a mortal sickness of the mind which should yet carry her towards death and despair.'

That scarcely suggests an ultimate triumph of happiness for both lovers, nor do I think that the later statements that 'Fate played his game artfully with this poor pair of children', and that 'the generations and the pangs were prepared before the curtain rose on the dark drama', can relate simply to the temporary wreck of their love but to some tragic conclusion, 'some consequence yet hanging in the stars', abruptly falling upon their bright romance.

It is almost useless to begin offering quotations from *Weir*. One paragraph taken from a work so eminently an organic whole would dislodge half a dozen others. There are phrases and images which remain in the mind for ever after a first reading; my lord going up 'the great bare staircase of his duty', the 'worthless and touching mementoes of her youth' which Mrs. Weir rummaged through on the eve of her death, the 'great rooty sweetness of bogs' round Hermiston, Kirstie 'washing floors with her empty heart', old Torrance 'of the many supplications, of the few days', Christina's eyes 'great as a stag's', Christina whose essential self, in the pangs of first love, talked feverishly of something else, 'like a nervous person at a fire'; the 'tender and lively colours' of moorland spring; Kirstie, struck with fear in her middle age, and envisaging 'the blank butt-end where she must crawl to die'. But where every page brings its own satisfaction and its own unique gift, not of the purple patch or the flamboyant epithet, but of the continued unity of design, it is impossible to give to any who may be unfamiliar with the book the barest idea of the rich and universal radiance with which that sympathy, which he had once named as the one tool in the writer's workshop, has clothed that common language in which we others mumble and shriek with tongue and pen. It had



taken twenty years, some of them spent in a preoccupation with the merely ornamental aspect of words, twenty hard years, to produce such a style and such a vitality and truth, and for *Weir*, I think we would have been ready to wait another twenty. After so many years of laborious industry given to the chronicling of dead sinners ('dead' from the point of view of characterization as well as of chronology), of playing on the lines of Skelt with Jacobites and douce lawyers and pirates and beachcombers, suddenly there was vouchsafed him strength for a harder flight, where all the experience that he had gathered and 'proved upon his pulses' might be fused into a work of real art. After long travelling by a road lined with variegated and mannered pieces of architecture, we escape to be among the hills, under the wide and starry sky. Heaven alone knows where, in the feverishly energetic years at Vailima, he found space for the solitude and musing and moods of 'negative capability' which are necessary to the highest form of writing; but he must have found them, and we can only deduce how great a factor inward solitude was in a life which seemed so largely made up of a restless sociability, and how remarkably he must have possessed the power to live at the highest pitch, to make instant and full use of such moments as suddenly fall free for reflection.

'The time comes when a man should cease prelusory gymnastic, stand up, put a violence upon his will, and, for better or worse, begin the business of creation.'

But who would have guessed, after so long a time of such varied and clever prelusory gymnastic that the outcome would be so free, so simple, so lovely, or with how heartfelt a surprise we should see emerge from those shackles and fetters of words the essential and intuitive artist whom we had seen in the boy and lost in the prison-house of technique and personal circumstance? It was

worth it, we concede under the shadow of our loss; and it was a reasonable conclusion to a process which sometimes appeared to have reached a false goal. The demands of logic are satisfied and made one with pleasure. If that, as the reviewers say, is not art, I should like to see what is. There is no deficiency anywhere, for all qualities combine, as in Sir John Denham's famous river that was though deep yet clear, and so many other things besides. And therefore, as I have said, quotation is almost useless. Why, for example, should we choose the passages describing Mrs. Weir's tender and lyrically emotional piety, a quality so much more Scottish than the Englishman suspects, and omit the scene in the Justiciary Court where Hermiston delights in sentencing to death the shabby scoundrel, Duncan Jopp? Or who is to decide whether the scene between Hermiston and Archie is more subtly drawn than the midnight scene between Archie and that figure whom I am almost tempted to label as 'epic', the elder Kirstie? Or shall the anthologizer pick on that superb account of the adventure of the Elliott brothers scouring the moors all night in pursuit of their father's murderer, only to omit the picture of Archie and Christina sitting on the old grey tomb in the moorland solitude, while the girl sings the account of many such exploits of the 'auld, auld Elliotts, clay-cauld Elliotts . . . a' quaitit noo in the grave'?

But among all these vivid episodes, I have omitted that which is perhaps most expressive of the quality in *Weir* which most forcibly strikes the reader as being new to Stevenson's work. The conversation between Archie and Kirstie may be indicative of a remarkable increase in his powers of drawing a woman, but he had never lacked the ability to draw that type of middle-aged or elderly woman who appears so frequently and sarcastically in Scottish stories. It was from love and the inexperienced girl that

he seemed to keep his hand; it was the battle and the play of sex which he had evaded, only now at length to analyse those forces with an insight which makes us twentieth-century smatterers realize that common sense (plus imagination) did not have to wait to live until it had been Teutonically baptized as 'psychology'. As with his own hero, in the last page of *Weir*, 'There arose from before him the curtains of boyhood, and he saw for the first time the ambiguous face of woman as she is'. For this reason, then, because the book here brings us its only surprise among a score of achievements, I feel it necessary to quote part of the description of Christina's emotions after the first thrill of finding Archie's eyes fixed upon her and her pretty clothes in kirk has electrified her fingers into tearing the page of the psalm book. I hesitated between this and the description of Archie on his way to that fateful service, crying out in his heart for 'a live face' among the stolid congregation, youthfully preoccupied with his own grave and already hearing the spirit of the Earth laugh out in a thunder-peal over it, spell-bound at sight of the primroses budding by the old black tombstone; but that, despite its Stevensonian delicacy and tact in dealing with youth, is so purely Louis Stevenson twenty years earlier that it can be reconstructed from the early letters and poems by the least imaginative. ('I've been to church and am not depressed—a great step.') It contains nothing that we had not known to be in the man, but in contrast to it, what a wealth of power unguessed at lies in the account of the disturbance in the girl's shallower nature. It recalls nothing so much as the wholly unexpected passion of Dido's sufferings in the Fourth Aeneid.

'You might say the joints of her body thought and remembered, and were gladdened, but her essential self, in the immediate theatre of consciousness, talked feverishly of something

else, like a nervous person at a fire. The image that she most complacently dwelt on was that of Miss Christina in her character of the Fair Lass of Cauldstaneslap, carrying all before her in the straw-coloured frock, the violet mantle, and the yellow cobweb stockings. Archie's image on the other hand, when it presented itself was never welcomed—far less welcomed with any ardour, and it was exposed at times to merciless criticism. In the long, vague dialogues she held in her mind, often with imaginary, often with unrealized interlocutors, Archie, if he were referred to at all, came in for savage handling. He was described as "looking like a stork", "staring like a caul", "a face like a ghaist's". "Do you call that manners?" she said; or, "I soon put him in his place". "'Miss Christina, if you please, Mr. Weir!' says I, and just flyped up my skirt tails." With gabble like this she would entertain herself long whiles together, and then her eye would perhaps fall on the torn leaf, and the eyes of Archie would appear again from the darkness of the wall, and the voluble words deserted her, and she would lie still and stupid, and think upon nothing with devotion, and be sometimes raised by a quiet sigh. Had a doctor of medicine come into that loft, he would have diagnosed a healthy, well-developed, eminently vivacious lass lying on her face in a fit of the sulks; not one who had just contracted, or was just contracting, a mortal sickness of the mind which should yet carry her towards death and despair. Had it been a doctor of psychology, he might have been pardoned for divining in the girl a passion of childish vanity, self-love *in excelsis*, and no more. It is to be understood that I have been painting chaos and describing the inarticulate. Every lineament that appears is too precise, almost every word used too strong. Take a finger-post in the mountains on a day of rolling mists; I have but copied the names that appear upon the pointers, the names of definite and famous cities far distant, and now perhaps basking in sunshine; but Christina remained all these hours, as it were, at the foot of the post itself, not moving, and enveloped in mutable and blinding wreaths of haze.'

I admit that I am not in a position to examine *Weir* through English eyes, but if it were merely the local and the parochial in it which stirred me so deeply, I might

reasonably expect to derive a little more pleasure than I do derive from certain modern Scots novels. The more Scottish it becomes, the more it appears to cease to be purely parochial. For example, when Christina is on her way home from church after her first glimpse of Archie, and her emotion betrays itself in excited cries and laughter as she plays with the children, her brother, the rustic poet, observes that she is 'shüirely fey', this under the very shadow of Calvin and his Sabbath; 'fey'—strange, possessed, elated like those on the way to a death unlooked for, no Christian condition. But the tragic falling in love of the boy and girl is the more tragic to us from this reminder that we are reading of a country of racial confusion, whose formal religion is, far more than English religion, a veneer concealing dark and primitive passions.

There is nothing like that in the one novel beside which *Weir* can stand confidently and for ever—*Wuthering Heights*. No one ever turned to it to catch the atmosphere of Yorkshire in the closing years of the eighteenth century; no one abroad ever read it for the sake of breathing English air or comforting his exile with remembrances of the little home patriotisms and the fashions of a countryside. But *Weir* can offer you not only Edinburgh and the hills of home, but a girl's heaven and a young man's hell, which do not differ perceptibly, in artistic degree, from the heaven and hell once experienced in Verona. It gives us the little and the particular, form and gesture and colour, as a ballad gives them; every detail of Christina's yellow muslin frock and violet jacket, the primroses clasped in the cairngorm brooch, her '*penchant* for acting stylishly', but she is youth of everywhere and every age, even as Archie is, when he lies moaning in the Hunter's Bog because his father has sentenced a man to be hanged. No one could be more of an individual than the elder Kirstie; but in her midnight

talk with Archie she is also the chorus, illuminating the darkness between one mishap and another with her reflections on love and youth and the eternal patience which man must oppose to his eternal disappointment. And yet how little the here and now matter, how unobtrusive an accent or a reference to history appears, just because the unity of the whole book is so sure and strong. Has Stevenson contradicted his own saying, that the novelist need 'not care particularly if he miss the tone of conversation, the pungent material detail of the day's manners, the reproduction of the atmosphere of the environment . . . a passion or a character is so much the better depicted as it rises clearer from material circumstance'? Or is it that by his very 'not caring', his sudden freedom from the shackles of technique he achieved a truth so much greater than truth of detail that every minor circumstance was inevitably transfigured without conscious effort?

'I am glad', wrote Tchegov, 'I did not listen to Grigorovitch two or three years ago, and write a novel! I can just imagine what a lot of good material I should have spoiled. He says: "Talent and freshness overcome everything." It is truer to say that talent and freshness can spoil a great deal. . . . One wants to be mature—that is one thing; and for another the *feeling of personal freedom* is essential.'

It was not a question of two or three but of twenty years with Stevenson, and he had not refrained from writing a number of novels; but what he had only at last achieved was the 'feeling of personal freedom'. Broadcast introspection was foreign to his nature, and he would have been very shy of using the phrase; but we understand that that is what he had found, and it is our sense of being able to share in a personal transformation which makes every fresh reading of the book a renewal of our own power.

As Mr. Edwin Muir has said in his appreciation of *Weir*,

'The story is genuine, original and of the first rank from beginning to end. Everything is suddenly real. . . . It is not the style which we usually think of as Stevenson's. It is at once simple and full, delicate and noble, and without a trace of affectation. . . . The whole story indeed has a noble gentleness and inflexibility.'

I quarrel with only one word there, and that is 'gentleness'. As a personal quality it has often been ascribed to Stevenson, but the word which I would substitute here is 'innocence'. 'Pure' is an unctuous epithet, but 'innocent' seems to me to be the only epithet for the story of Archie Weir who was fated to have 'a Roman sense of duty, an instinctive aristocracy of manners and taste; to be'—no, not 'the son of Adam Weir and Jean Rutherford', but of those very distant earthly relations of theirs, Thomas Stevenson and Margaret Balfour. No one will deny that no living English novelist of any standing, Mrs. Woolf always excepted, and Mr. Huxley, if he can be imagined as ever approaching so near to his characters, and Mr. Forster being partially excepted because he deals in only spiritual brutality, would ever dream of giving us the history of Archie's boyhood without incidents of physical cruelty and exaggerated sexuality. But these elements do not exist for us while we read *Weir*, and yet we move in no prim emasculate world. Cruelty had no fascination for Stevenson. It roused him to fury against the person practising it. Nor could he enjoy himself in gloating over mental and spiritual cruelty. I have read the remark that he was incapable of describing the revenge on pride and vanity and stupidity which Meredith could deal out to his unfortunate characters. There is suffering in plenty in *Weir*, but it is treated as sacred.

It would be well if all those modern novelists who

imagine that because violence, coarseness, and intellectual vigour form so much of the Scottish make-up, the mere photography of these elements constitutes a novel, would study *Weir* a little. They might also read the introduction to the volume containing it in the Tusitala Edition and consider Stevenson's agonized revelation of self-mistrust and life-weariness, made to Lloyd Osbourne after he had read part of *Weir* to the Vailima household and found it received, as he thought, with the silence of indifference. I fully believe that it was quite the opposite silence which held them, and that one and all appreciated its greatness, but it may well be that he had chosen a medium which they could not understand. Had they been Scots, had there been for even one of them hills of home and the recollection of some old Torrance 'of the many supplications, of the few days', there might have been tears, there might have been words. Perhaps he suddenly realized that the yearning in his voice when he read of the Sparta which was his and which he had to adorn, fell on deaf ears. Is the book too Scottish to admit the foreigner to the ultimate beauty? I do not think so, but it is a hard question, and I am forced to let others answer it in foreign voices.

It is easy to guess what horrors the moderns would introduce if they were telling the story, what a hideously dull style would be employed, what obscenities and perversities they would proudly thrust into the empty heart of middle-aged Kirstie (and probably into the hearts of everybody else in the book), above all, with what lust they would quickly defile the passion set in train when the eyes of boy and girl first met in the kirk. Appalling process!—as Wordsworth said when the donkey grinned. For this, they say, is truth, and this is the way to save Scotland—to escape from the kail-yard—as if such a cheap and easy reversal were not obviously a mere return to it, appealing



to the same gross sentimentalities and equally ignorant of that region of disciplined art in which *Weir* is a bright planet. The kail-yarders and the moderns are primitives. Stevenson is the civilized artist. He had always protested against the idea that art could 'compete with life'.

'For the welter of impressions, all forcible but all discreet<sup>1</sup> which life presents, it substitutes a certain artificial series of impressions, all indeed most feebly represented, but all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same idea, all chiming together like consonant notes in music or like the graduated tints in a good picture. From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this; and if there is anywhere a word that looks another way, the book would be stronger, clearer, and (I had almost said) fuller without it. Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate. Life imposes by brute energy, like inarticulate thunder; art catches the ear, among the far louder noises of experience, like an air artificially made by a discreet musician. A proposition of geometry does not compete with life; and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for a work of art. Both are reasonable, both untrue to the crude fact; both inhere in nature, neither represents it. The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, as a shoe must still consist of leather, but by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work.'

But the modern novelists are determined at all costs to compete with life, because man is their only measure, and I can only beg them, if they be Scots, to remember they can

<sup>1</sup> I have sometimes wondered if Stevenson really wrote 'discrete' here. 'Discreet' hardly seems to fit the context as an epithet for the processes of life, though its later use in the passage is perfectly fitting.

have the privilege, if they care, of attempting to write something worthy of the country which produced *Weir of Hermiston*; for Sidney Colvin's superlatives almost erred, for once, on the side of moderation, when he declared that 'no son of Scotland has died leaving with his last breath a worthier tribute to the land he loved'.

## CHAPTER IV

### HIS ESSAYS AND MISCELLANEOUS PROSE

'The critics murmur over my consistent egotism.'

R. L. S. *A Chapter on Dreams* (*Memories and Portraits*).

THERE is always a tendency to look upon the essay as a species of superior literary confectionery; and apart from the actual products of the baker, the Scots are not successful in creating confectionery. Stevenson is their one writer of essays of any artistic merit, and you will turn to him in vain for that cheerful Sunday newspaper type of essay which expresses the same not very original idea over and over again with a nice derangement of epithets—puts, in fact, as its author would be the first to say, the star bowler on at the other end occasionally. In comparison with Stevenson at his best, how terribly playful, how English, easy-going, and ungrown-up Lamb appears. Except when he writes on actors or dramatists, I find him tedious in his sprightliness, and his less successful essays have not half the appeal of Leigh Hunt's journalism. It cannot be denied that his most celebrated essays are more finished masterpieces in the rather callous style of the writer for *Punch* than anything Stevenson produced.<sup>1</sup> Stevenson is a more unequal essayist; even in *Across the Plains* there are such essays as *A Chapter on Dreams* and *Beggars*, which are very inferior in form to *Old Mortality* or *Ordered South* or *Pulvis et Umbra*. They were written under contract and probably suffered much from that, for he never could adapt himself to that relationship with ease. They are two of his

<sup>1</sup> And yet some talk as though his essays stand beside Stevenson's much as the *Unfinished Symphony* beside Dvořák's *Humoreske*, whereas it is all too clear that if there is any unfinished of symphonies, we must connect it—alas, literally—with the author of *Weir*.

notably unsuccessful essays, but whatever caused their unsuccess, it was not that quality of being 'homely, cheerful, charming', and of 'adorning the bookshelf with a pretty, pale, bedside cheerfulness which will delight all whose culture exceeds their originality', which Mr. Swinnerton managed to discover in Stevenson's essays. It probably did not occur to Mr. Swinnerton that the root of that 'cheerfulness' was anything as solemn as the utterance of the psalm which the small child repeated to his grandfather in Colinton Manse.

Thy foot He'll not let slide, nor will  
He slumber that thee keeps;  
Behold, He that keeps Israel,  
He slumbers not nor sleeps.

If the essays fail, it is rather because of a flatness which has robbed his seriousness of its wilder lyricism and restricted its cadences to a too conversational level. For it is when melody comes to touch his seriousness to something more like poetry that the highest point of style in the essays is reached. Take part of the wonderful conclusion of *Pulvis et Umbra*:

'We look at our feet where the ground is blackened with the swarming ant: a creature so small, so far from us in the hierarchy of brutes, that we can scarce trace and scarce comprehend his doings; and here also, in his ordered politics and rigorous justice, we see confessed the law of duty and the fact of individual sin. Does it stop, then, with the ant? Rather this desire of well-doing and this doom of frailty run through all the grades of life: rather is this earth, from the frosty top of Everest to the next margin of the internal fire, one stage of ineffectual virtues and one temple of pious tears and perseverance. The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together. It is the common and the god-like law of life. The browsers, the biters, the barkers, the hairy coats of field and forest, the squirrel in the oak, the thousand-footed creeper in the dust, as they share with us the gift of life, share with us the love of an

ideal: strive like us—like us are tempted to grow weary of the struggle—to do well; like us receive at times unmerited refreshment, visitings of support, returns of courage; and are condemned like us to be crucified between that double law of the members and the will.'

It is absolute pulpit, and the pulpit has not yet ceased to be the centre from which Scottish emotionalism is directed and canalized, from which for long years still Scottish prose literature will continue to draw an unearthly vehemence or a stubborn argumentativeness. I do not deny that Stevenson the essayist can command another style. He can be the young man journeying in France.

'The wife of the Maréchal-de-logis was a handsome woman, and yet the Arethusa was not sorry to be gone from her society. Something of her image, cool as a peach on that hot afternoon, still lingers in his memory.'

Or he may be merely the observant, the uncommonly observant traveller, setting down the natural aspect of a place with fidelity and detail. Such an essay as *The Old Pacific Capital* is full of descriptions, indicative of that strange, instinctive, rhythmic response to the movements of tide and sky and wind which, more than accurate knowledge of mathematics, had characterized the engineering achievements of his father and grandfather.

'These long beaches are enticing to the idle man. It would be hard to find a walk more solitary and at the same time more exciting to the mind. Crowds of ducks and sea-gulls hover over the sea. Sandpipers trot in and out by troops after the retiring waves, trilling together in a chorus of infinitesimal song. Strange sea-tangles, new to the European eye, the bones of whales, or sometimes a whole whale's carcase, white with carrion-gulls and poisoning the wind, lie scattered here and there along the sands. The waves come in slowly, vast and green, curve their translucent necks, and burst with a surprising uproar, that runs, waxing and waning, up and down the long key-board of the beach. The foam of these great ruins mounts

in an instant to the ridge of the sand glaxis, swiftly fleets back again, and is met and buried by the next breaker. The interest is perpetually fresh.'

Or take from the same essay the scrupulous detail of the account of a forest fire.

'To visit the woods while they are languidly burning is a strange piece of experience. The fire passes through the underbrush at a run. Every here and there a tree flares up instantaneously from root to summit, scattering tufts of flame, and is quenched, it seems, as quickly. But this last is only in semblance. For after this first squib-like conflagration of the dry moss and twigs, there remains behind a deep-rooted and consuming fire in the very entrails of the tree. The resin of the pitch-pine is principally condensed at the base of the bole and in the spreading roots. Thus, after the light, showy, skirmishing flames, which are only as the match to the explosion, have already scampered down the wind into the distance, the true harm is but beginning for this giant of the woods. You may approach the tree from one side, and see it scorched indeed from top to bottom, but apparently survivor of the peril. Make the circuit, and there, on the other side of the column, is a clear mass of living coal, spreading like an ulcer; while underground, to their most extended fibre, the roots are being eaten out by fire, and the smoke is rising through the fissures to the surface.'

Equally vivid are the series of quick sketches in *Random Memories* which give us a panorama of Fife and of Wick and its environs. But his descriptions never tail off into mere languid and voluptuous word-painting. They are clear and definite, and he knew where to stop. And the general picture remains in our minds—the poplars and the canals of *An Inland Voyage* (not forgetting such a delicious detail as the town clock at Compiègne with its gilded puppets to strike the quarters), and the bleak, windy Cevennes, their chestnut forests and wandering flocks in *Travels with a Donkey*. It is surprising to think how little of such work he devoted to his own country. The essay

on wintry walking in Ayrshire is about his fullest piece of writing descriptive of Scottish scenery, and there how skillfully he uses the past, the torture of Alan Stewart at Cossraguel and the legend of the gipsies and Lady Cassilis.

No doubt, if you want a really heavy piece of reasoning in an essay, or a potted philosophy, or an exposition, you will find Stevenson too light, too content to be the 'pleasant gauger' on the open road. On the other hand, if you demand that the essayist shall supply nothing but the most superficial ethical pleasantries and diffuse a sense of general comfort and flatter your intellect and your knowledge, you will find you have come to the wrong man. Even the earliest dissertations on marriage and idleness and truth, in *Virginibus*, are not the work of a young man trying to be clever or to show off the fruits of his reading. You will find you have come to a desperately serious moralist belonging to a nation of extremists whose very wildness is the other side of the religious passion which can burst out in the most unexpected corners. (On starting for his first African journey, Mungo Park, whom one conceives as a sober enough character, wrote to the doctor who had been his master, 'If I ever see my native land again, may I rather see the green sod on your grave than see you anything but a Christian'. What the less expressive South would regard as something only now and then to be uttered by a Cowper in some Evangelical coterie under the stress of a 'movement', is mere common utterance elsewhere.)

It is characteristic that two of Stevenson's finest essays, *Old Mortality* and *Ordered South* dwell on the fact of death. *Ordered South*, the immediate fruit of the winter at Mentone, when he was twenty-three, has not had justice done to it. It is not a boyish piece of work. It has a tranquil and dignified tone, a courage which is infinitely more moving

than the forced gaiety of his later invalid days, and sentences more pathetic than he ever wrote afterwards.

'He has not deceived himself; he has known from the beginning that he followed the pillar of fire and cloud, only to perish himself in the wilderness, and that it was reserved for others to enter joyfully into possession of the land. And so, as everything grows grayer and quieter about him, and slopes towards extinction, these unfaded visions accompany his sad decline, and follow him, with friendly voices and hopeful words, into the very vestibule of death. The desire of love or of fame scarcely moved him, in his days of health, more strongly than these generous aspirations move him now; and so life is carried forward beyond life, and a vista kept open for the eyes of hope, even when his hands grope already on the face of the impassable.'

Those last few words are as fine as the best of his poems.

*Old Mortality* is so much more widely known that I feel it need hardly be referred to until I attempt to deal with the whole question of Stevenson's style. It is one of his big achievements, and in it he achieved most brilliantly that characteristic effect of his, the creating of an unheard melody, a dumb tune which lingers and reverberates in the memory after the actual words have been read and the book has been closed. A mood responds to a mood. It is not a meeting of intellects. That was not what he aimed at. The instinctive, the primitive apprehension, was the origin and the goal of his writing.

'You believe in the extreme moment of the facts that humanity has acquired and is acquiring; I think them of moment, but still of much less than those inherent or inherited brute principles and law that sit upon us (in the character of conscience) as heavy as a shirt of mail, and that (in the character of the affections and the airy spirit of pleasure) make all the light of our lives.'

But the literary world still believes, alas, that it had to wait for D. H. Lawrence to attempt to live out that point of view.



I suppose that Stevenson's essays might be summed up as moralized autobiography, not lending themselves to any deep analysis. A collection such as *Memories and Portraits* is one long tale of nationality, ancestry, heredity, country cottage, dogs, favourite novelists, and so forth. In spite of or because of this, they appeal to readers who would be bored by pages of nondescript cheerfulness and well-read Horatian reflections, and could not follow metaphysical argument. And against such a clear background, he moralizes with a far better grace than when, in response to an editor, he has to write *A Christmas Sermon*, conveying within the narrow scope of an essay an amount of insight into life for which a less thrifty and disciplined onlooker and writer would have to struggle through a whole involved novel. No other English essayist could make you an essay as moving as *The Lantern-Bearers* (though it might well have stopped with the third section) from one slight memory of one of boyhood's holiday fashions. One would feel all the time the conscious elaboration, while Stevenson, once launched from a September evening at North Berwick, escapes into a voyage which may turn to sermon or to matter for poetry, and, in spite of his devotion to a strict compression, never needs to pad.

The *Fables* are curious bits of writing, hard to allocate to their true dates of composition, though several bear the obvious stamp of the stormy years, the early seventies; particularly those which turn on the revolt of youth (*The House of Eld*) and the hollowness of conventional religion (*The Yellow Paint*).

Old is the tree and the fruit good,  
Very old and thick the wood.  
Woodman, is your courage stout?  
Beware! the net is wrapped about  
Your mother's heart, your father's bones. . . .

Youth wins freedom at the cost of putting a sword through a parent's heart. It is the thought underlying so many of his writings, born of the peculiarly northern sense of the sacredness of the family and the mystery of the inherited elements in the self.

Or in other fables we hear the familiar call to courage and to action. Take the opening of *The Sinking Ship*.

"Sir," said the first lieutenant, bursting into the Captain's cabin, "the ship is going down."

"Very well, Mr. Spoker," said the Captain, "but that is no reason for going about half-shaved . . ."

The 'old rover with an axe' in *Faith, Half Faith and No Faith at all* is a sound Stevensonian moralist, who cries, 'I am off to die with Odin' on hearing that the powers of evil are threatening to overcome the gods. The priest is ready to cry, 'All is lost', or to be off with the 'virtuous person' to try to 'make it up with the devil'; Presbyterianism and Edinburgh society as seen by a young man in Heriot Row.

Or the more sardonic humour that was so characteristic of him may come out in a piece such as *Something in it*, having for hero the missionary who finds himself in the islands of the dead and argues too obstinately, the 'amazed evangelist' who

Stands unshook from age to youth  
Upon one pin-point of the truth.

But on the whole the *Fables* are more remarkable for their acute mockery and their grim flashes than for any outstanding literary beauty, though one remembers the dead in the cairn who laid hold of the living man's hand, 'many and faint like ants'; and a passage in *The Touchstone* which tells of the effect of the pebble that was truth.

'And he took the pebble, and turned its light upon the heavens, and they deepened about him like the pit, and he turned it on the hills, and the hills were cold and rugged, but

life ran in their sides, so that his own life bounded; and he turned it on the dust, and he beheld the dust with joy and terror; and he turned it on himself, and kneeled down and prayed.'

But when all is said and done, nothing can help us to understand the attitude behind any of his prose works as reading the letters will help. They are far more worth studying than *In the South Seas*, or essays on John Knox and women (I suppose some research student will some day discover why he wrote that), or *A Footnote to History*, or his exasperating attempts to deal with Burns and Villon. From none of these would you infer that he had any particular 'view' of life, or that he startlingly (at least to the people I have just mentioned who think that most things, including the revolt against over-intellectualism, began with D. H. Lawrence) championed the assertion of the instinctive side of our nature. A few weeks before his death, he wrote to Bob Stevenson:

'If I had to begin again—I know not—*si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait* . . . I know not at all—I believe I should try to honour Sex more religiously. The worst of our education is that Christianity does not recognize and hallow Sex. It looks askance at it, over its shoulder, oppressed as it is by reminiscences of hermits and Asiatic self-tortures. It is a terrible hiatus in our modern religions that they cannot see and make venerable that which they ought to see first and hallow most. Well, it is so; I cannot be wiser than my generation.

'But no doubt there is something great in the half-success that has attended the effort of turning into an emotional religion, Bald Conduct, without any appeal, or almost none, to the figurative, mysterious, and constitutive facts of life. Not that conduct is not constitutive, but dear! it's dreary! On the whole, conduct is better dealt with on the cast-iron "gentleman" and duty formula, with as little fervour and poetry as possible: stoical and short.'

The late John Freeman criticized that remark about

Christianity and sex as coming from a born moralist rather than from a born artist. Stevenson was born both. The words, from him, are a revelation, proving that the real man had not his heart all the time in the pirates' adventure and the flight in the heather. And in the sentence about 'Bald Conduct' there lie depths of wisdom and riches of artistic truth which his self-imposed technique and choice of subject had prevented (and still prevent) the world from realizing. But we have gained *Weir*. We need not lament nor make trouble with 'might have been'. But we may under-estimate the essays and shorter prose writings unless we take the trouble to find out from the letters what qualities of character in this perpetually surprising writer make so much autobiography well worth reading. There is inevitably every temptation to draw a comparison with Lawrence—both dying at the same age, both travelling feverishly in and out of Europe in search of relief from the same disease. But there is no constant formula for the product of literary genius plus tuberculosis, and on the whole an inherited regard for the God of Bethel, nurtured by Scottish institutionalism, seems to produce as fine art, even if it be contained in a fragment of a story, as any amount of traffic with 'dark gods'. To read Stevenson's letters is to be made to feel that there is something august about life and duty; to read Lawrence's is to be often saddened, but more often insidiously tempted to judge and to cry out—admittedly from inexperience—that life, much less art, is not like that; that both return, in the end, to a stupendous 'ought'; that you cannot wantonly reach the highest. For the full expression of Stevenson's conviction of this, we have to read the essays (even if it were only the few remarkable ones I have mentioned), and the letters, for his costume dramas and pirates tell us nothing.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ARTIST AND HIS TECHNIQUE

'For the nonce, my skill deserts me, such as it is, or was. It was a very little dose of inspiration, and a pretty little trick of style, long lost, improved by the most heroic industry.'

R. L. S. *Letters*, vol. iv. (Two months before his death.)

'Nothing is less possible to the real artist than pose—he is less capable of it than the ordinary man of business.'

ROGER FRY, *Vision and Design*.

ALMOST everything that Stevenson had to say on art in general and in particular on the art of writing may be extracted from the second volume of the letters and from a number of essays written during the period covered by that volume—1880–7. It was then that the principal essays collected in *The Art of Writing* were published, along with *Fontainebleau (Across the Plains)* and *A Gossip on Romance* and *A Humble Apology (Memories and Portraits)*. The *Letters to a Young Gentleman (Across the Plains)* was not written until 1888, but should be included here.

These are the years when we may consider Stevenson as having made for himself a definite place in the literary world and laid the foundations of that success which, on his arrival in America in 1887, brought him such tokens of being celebrated as partly amused, partly gratified, and partly really scared him. They were the first years after marriage, when the constant thought of his responsibility for a whole household dictated feverish effort, scheming and planning, which was too hard a strain for one who had been, in his own happy phrase, 'willow-slender and careless as the daisies'. It is in the letters of this time that the references to his continued dependence upon his father occur most thickly and tragically. 'It is dreadful to be a great, big man, and not be able to buy bread . . . I warn you, unless I have great luck, I shall have to fall upon you

at the New Year like a hundredweight of bricks. . . . Just when I think I am getting through my troubles, crack, down goes my health, I have a long, costly sickness, and begin the world again. It is fortunate for me I have a father, or I should long ago have died.'

The old irresponsible days of Edinburgh and Swanston were gone, the days when, although it might be galling to be short of cash, it did not seem, except in the *Ordered South* period, morally revolting to depend upon Heriot Row for support. 'Doctor, rent, chemist', the education of his step-son, 'Byles the butcher', were what he had shouldered, and whenever he was congratulating himself on feeling equal to the burden, a taste of Scottish climate, or some less obvious cause, would again spell disaster to fragile lungs and overstrained nerves. Again he would be facing the 'haunting enemy', an enemy who 'was exciting at first, but has now, by the iteration of his strokes, become merely annoying and inexpressibly irksome'. His feverish consciousness of his responsibilities drove him to take steps which would not have had to be contemplated in the old life of the seventies; the unhappy candidature for the history chair at Edinburgh, for example, when the Bohemian (or would-be Bohemian) challenged that academic and official sphere which he usually treated with scorn, only (fortunately) to experience rebuff.

The premature deaths of two of his dearest friends, James Walter Ferrier and Fleeming Jenkin, shook him sorely, and the fact that by his art he was able worthily to commemorate them was a painful consolation. Finally, in 1887, after suffering disabilities which it had been extraordinarily grievous to his household to witness, Thomas Stevenson died, that man of passionate emotion, originality, and intelligence whose imagination and melancholy lived on in his son. This was the climax to the most

troubled years of Stevenson's life. No thinking person, even if he has never suffered a haemorrhage from the lungs and is neither a Presbyterian nor an artist, can be nearing forty without thinking often and differently about death, and for him there were weeks of 'illness or sheer weakness when he was not allowed to speak, or to speak only in a whisper.' ('Do not think me unhappy; I have not been so for years; but . . . all is at a standstill; books closed, paper put aside, the voice, the eternal voice of R. L. S., well silenced.') 'Unhappy'—of course he was not that. He had his art, so that half-alive word could not touch him; but substitute for it a word of life. Was he suffering? In those long periods of inactivity he had time to reflect. He had already reflected a good deal in his solitary youth on the answer which John Calvin offered to the perplexed inquirer. Already, so rapidly and irrevocably do frequent approaches to death change the perspective of what has gone before, that boyhood seemed far away.

The eternal dawn, beyond a doubt,  
Shall break on hill and plain,  
And put all stars and candles out  
Ere we be young again.

So you may see, if you but look  
Through the windows of this book,  
Another child, far, far away,  
And in another garden, play . . .  
. . . It is but a child of air  
That lingers in the garden there.

But retrospect had its darker side, when he could write, in a mood when he really lived and felt no necessity to play the professional optimist:

#### THE LAST SIGHT

Once more I saw him. In the lofty room,  
Where oft with lights and company his tongue

Was trump to honest laughter, sate attired  
A something in his likeness.—‘Look!’ said one,  
Unkindly kind, ‘look up, it is your boy!’  
And the dread changeling gazed on me in vain.

Marriage altered everything.

‘Times are changed with him who marries; there are no more by-path meadows, where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave.’

The by-path meadows had been so very pleasant, the colony of painters at Barbizon, in the days when he could walk for miles and really seemed to be outgrowing some of his physical weakness, had been such a heavenly refuge from the east winds and haar of smug, respectable Edinburgh. The ideal life for the artist had lain there. ‘No rot about a fellow’s behaviour’; freedom from the tiresome solicitude of Heriot Row where he was too much loved and protected and parents were always anxious to take his temperature, both physically and spiritually, despite his frequent protest, ‘You must take me as I am’. At the slightest hint of illness on his part in childhood, home, we may judge, lost its head, and fussed, and seemed desirous of turning him into Louise instead of Louis. They had only too good reasons for fussing, but nevertheless, it was Louis he was, he was masculine, and when he was well enough to be free, freedom was all he wanted. At the age of seventeen, when trifling with engineering at Anstruther, having complained in a letter of a slight cold which made his eyes ache, he burst out impatiently that his father ‘need not imagine that I have a bad cold or am stone-blind from this description, which is the whole truth’. During the ‘ordered south’ winter, it is often clear from his letters that his mother, not unnaturally, deaved him with questions which seemed to him largely irrelevant. He liked to be noticed, like all of us, according to his own plans.



'He enjoyed a strenuous idleness full of visions, hearty meals, long, sweltering walks, mirth among companions; and still floating like music through his brain, foresights of great works that Shakespeare might be proud to have conceived, headless epics, glorious torsos of dramas, and words that were alive with import. So in youth, like Moses from the mountain, we have sights of that House Beautiful of art which we shall never enter. They are dreams and unsubstantial; visions of style that repose upon no base of human meaning; the last heart-throbs of that excited amateur who has to die in all of us before the artist can be born. But they come to us in such a rainbow of glory that all subsequent achievement appears dull and earthly in comparison. We were all artists; almost all in the age of illusion, cultivating an imaginary genius, and walking to the strains of some deceiving Ariel; small wonder, indeed, if we were happy! But art, of whatever nature, is a kind mistress; and although these dreams of youth fall by their own baselessness, others succeed, graver and more substantial; the symptoms change, the amiable malady endures; and still, at an equal distance, the House Beautiful shines upon its hill-top.'

So he had written in *Fontainebleau*, one of his most successful essays, full of wisdom and enchantment. It was 'fun' no doubt, in certain moods to be conscious of the responsibilities one had embraced, and to talk and write like the wise respected head of a household, just as in Samoa afterwards it was 'fun' to be chieftain to a kind of clan (who were sometimes decorated with strappings of Stuart tartan), to give paternal advice on marriage and policy to native servants and conduct domestic courts of justice in the manner of a Braxfield. It was 'fun' to see how many personalities the essential self could assume and lay aside at will. Nevertheless, none of this 'fun' was quite as satisfying as youth at Barbizon had promised that life might be. Experience had then been deeper and warmer, the whole of a man's nature being directed towards self-fulfilment, and at rare moments experiencing 'the roll, the

rise, the carol, the creation'; but now these hateful physical limitations—no more walking tours, no more canoeing, no more healthy tiredness at the end of the day, but only a fatigue which poisoned life before any day had begun—narrowed a man's circle, and if those nearest him failed to understand any impatience or strain, he could no longer escape, even for a few weeks, to London and the Savile Club, or Barbizon and Gutz. And then the Stevenson conscience would speak out of the shadows, reminding him (in the early part of this middle period of his life) that his short stories and little travel books and *Cornhill* essays had perhaps not yet justified his obstinate refusal to try to be either an engineer or in any seriousness, a lawyer. By this time he must have loathed the sight of his father's signature on a cheque, and yet there seemed no escape from the humiliating and equivocal position. The only remedy seemed to be some rather serious bravado, an examination into the art he had chosen, a Scottishly dogmatic exposition of its technique and philosophy. It has been suggested by Mr. Edwin Muir that Stevenson suffered from perpetual uneasiness because the judgement of his own race, viewing culture with gloom and suspicion, was that the artist was a mere entertainer who could scarcely hope to be looked upon as playing the man and a Calvinist's part in life; and that therefore he punished himself in the person of some of the shallow, unsound characters whom he created, and was challenging the whole bulk of public opinion as his youth had known it, when he argued that art must please, and that 'to please is to serve'. There is some truth in this, though those unacquainted with the power of the Kirk and the literary history of Scotland, whose poets are never mistaken for oracles, may think it far-fetched; but he did not hesitate to punish himself in other ways, perhaps more subtly, for example, by trans-

lating himself into such a character as Archie Weir, for whom he could not feel anything in the nature of contempt, but only a tenderness that might be far more severe than contempt and a love that could inflict the extreme of pain, though Archie's innocence would never have called for such treatment.

And so, during those trying years of making scurrying journeys abroad in order to repair the harm done to health by a summer in Scotland, he thought and wrote about the technique and morality of the profession he had so pertinaciously chosen. His choice had been indeed a strange business. 'It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) but that I had vowed that I would learn to write.' That one so clear-sighted should ever have made the distinction, even when young, surprises us, and although he gives his justification of it in the *Fontainebleau* essay, we are conscious that he is begging the question. Here he speaks of the stage when 'a man is too much occupied with style to be aware of the necessity for any matter', and proceeds to argue, with the thought of French technique and love of style at the back of his mind, that this stage is particularly excellent for the English artists, who 'dwell dispersed, unshielded among the intelligent bourgeois' and are always being reminded by the latter that art must have lofty aims and moral influence.

'For art is, first of all and last of all, a trade. The love of words and not a desire to publish new discoveries, the love of form and not a novel reading of historical events, mark the vocation of the writer and the painter. The arabesque, properly speaking, and even in literature, is the first fancy of the artist; he first plays with his material as a child plays with a kaleidoscope; and he is already in a second stage when he begins to use his pretty counters for the end of the representation. In that, he must pause long and toil faithfully; that is his apprenticeship; and it is only the few who will really grow beyond it, and

go forward, fully equipped, to do the business of real art—to give life to abstractions and significance and charm to facts. In the meanwhile, let him dwell much among his fellow-craftsmen. They alone can take a serious interest in the childish tasks and pitiful successes of these years. They alone can behold with equanimity this fingering of the dumb keyboard, this polishing of empty sentences, this dull and literal painting of dull and insignificant subjects. Outsiders will spur him on. They will say, "Why do you not write a great book? paint a great picture?" If his guardian angel fail him, they may even persuade him to the attempt, and, ten to one, his hand is coarsened and his style falsified for life.'

It may be objected that I have already described the Scot as being free from this oracular solemnity which besets the English when considering art, but his own country could at that time offer Stevenson no consolation. During his lifetime, Scottish literature was more completely denationalized than it had been at any time since the Union, for the weight of Victorian opinion and sentimentality rolled its destructive lava over the whole kingdom, nor could even the rocky ridge of Edinburgh withstand it. The independence of the Scot was not crushed, but it was for a while perverted, and when we are feeling fretful over the exuberance of the over-intellectualized literary Nationalist of to-day, we ought, perhaps, to remember how low our national literature had sunk in pre-kailyard times, and own that a little of their liveliness might have been some consolation to Stevenson in the eighties. As it was, he had alone to raise his voice in favour of technique, 'dexterity and finish', 'the cleanly and crafty employment of material', and against sham philosophy and insincere sublimity.

*The Letter to a Young Gentleman who proposes to embrace the Career of Art* is certainly not concerned, on the surface, with the soul of the artist. It is pervaded by a cynical

austerity which, far more than his Christmas card optimism, deserves to be remembered as characteristic of the man. The aspirant is treated to a good deal of cold common sense and no rambling about beauty and the mission of art. Beauty would never be cheapened by too frequent references from Stevenson, and on the second page of the essay he has calmly demolished any illusions the young gentleman may have had about 'vocation' by alluding to the state of mind which is 'not so much a vocation for art as an impatience of all other honest trades'. And quite right too, from the Presbyterian point of view. And then he proceeds to describe with all the seriousness of which he is capable, the demands made upon the artist by his profession; the unending drill, the unremitting labour, the need for the candour of the child at play and the zest of the hunter, the need for personal frugality, for perseverance and conscientiousness. And all for what? To equip himself to live by pleasing; to be of the same family as the Daughters of Joy, to train as if for the pulpit and then to walk the streets, perhaps to find no response to your soliciting, at any rate to be ill-paid and, in old age, unable to practise your art. Hardest of all, to be rewarded, if rewarded at all, for the more cheap and obvious elements in our work, and to miss appreciation of 'more exquisite refinements of proficiency and finish', to achieve which you daily revise and reject, is the artist's fate. But he has no right to complain or to expect more. With his eyes open, he chose the primrose way. 'In the wages of the life, not in the wages of the trade, lies your reward; the work is here the wages.'

It is with a shock that we find ourselves forced back perpetually, both here and in the letters, to the dogma that the one end of art is to please, to give to facts not only 'significance' but 'charm'. The conclusion does not

satisfy us, largely because we feel that it did not satisfy Stevenson. The contrast between the discipline and labour and the unheroic fruit of all the effort moves us to impatience and regret. It but adds to the conviction, first born in us when we pause to consider how little true pleasure is to be extracted from most of his fiction, that for years he strained and exhausted his powers by working on a philosophy against which he was really in rebellion.

'We are ever threatened by two contrary faults: both deadly . . . to pour forth cheap replicas, upon the one hand; upon the other . . . to forget that art is a diversion and a decoration, that no triumph or effort is of value, nor anything worth reaching except charm.'

We cannot help feeling a little incredulous. This philosophy could hardly have produced *Weir* or *The Ebb Tide*, or his best poetry, or such fine things among the essays as *Old Mortality* and *Pulvis et Umbra*, among whose severe moralizings creatures such as 'charm' and 'decoration' would wander like strayed revellers. In its less precise moments, the doctrine leads to passages in the letters from which the true Stevensonian turns with a sick feeling, such as:

'In my view, one dank, dispirited word is harmful, a crime of *lèse-humanité*, a piece of acquired evil; every gay, every bright word or picture, like every pleasant air of music, is a piece of pleasure set afloat; the reader catches it, and, if he be healthy, goes on his way rejoicing; and it is the business of art so to send him, as often as possible.'

In his own phrase, 'times are changed since the Lothian Road'.

Give me the eyes, give me the soul,  
Give me the lad that's gone.

Knowing quite well that none of this shakes their deep-rooted faith in the man, his admirers, on reading such a

depressing passage as I have quoted, appalled by the thought of the language Stevenson would have used if he had been taken at his word and compelled to live among gay, bright words, and pictures, are justified in giving way to some impatience. So wide, so ridiculously wide, is the gulf between preaching and practice. What charm illuminates *Jekyll and Hyde*! How gay and bright *The Pavilion on the Links* must always appear! *Kidnapped* positively radiates *bonhomie*, and as for *Prince Otto* and its light-heartedness—words fail us. We turn gratefully to Leslie Stephen's confirmation of our own sense of strain and dreariness: 'No artist of comparable power has created so few living and attractive characters.' No, the formula may work for essays and travel works, but it is inadequate for fiction. He must have known, for he had no illusions about what he wrote, that a certain amount of nonsense had become entangled with his sensible remarks about hard work and devotion to technique.

'An art is the very gist of life; it grows with you; you will never weary of an art at which you fervently and superstitiously labour. Superstitiously: I mean, think more of it than it deserves; be blind to its faults, as with a wife or father; forget the world in a technical trifle. The world is very serious: art is the cure of that, and must be taken very lightly; but to take art lightly, you must first be stupidly owlshly in earnest over it.'

'In your own art, bow your head over technique. Think of technique when you rise and when you go to bed. Forget purposes in the meanwhile; get to love technical processes; to glory in technical successes; get to see the world entirely through technical spectacles. . . .'

The Daughter of Joy emerges rather incongruously from all this scaffolding. He was rather pleased with her, I fancy. She satisfied his old, boyish desire to shock the bourgeois, stepping in such 'kenspeckle' fashion into the pages of a

sober aesthetic essay; and from her licensed frailty he could manufacture a scourge for himself.

The preoccupation with the function of pleasing and charming belongs almost entirely to the one period of his life. In the South Sea years we hear very much less about it. This may have been due to the greater stability afforded by more robust health and the quiescence of his disease, as well as by established reputation. Some allowance must be made too, for the fact that he was able, in those last years of his life, to regard himself as 'a man among men', laird of an estate and amateur politician. Having succeeded as an artist, he no longer needed to wonder if he ought not to invent sound reasons for maintaining the Calvinist view of art as a light entertainment. Able to move in wider and what some spinsters would call more 'virile' circles, he found new satisfaction for his eager curiosity and his love of the wayside encounter and the vagabond's independence in spite of domestic responsibilities and chains. He was able to recapture a little of the old irresponsible walking-tour habit of life. It was, to quite a large extent, the invalid who grew feverishly excited about technique, because he was denied the power to experiment with a wider life.

Nevertheless, even in those days when he seemed to preach most dogmatically the exaltation of technique and the habit of mind which would count a whole afternoon well spent turning a single phrase, he could rise to a height at which he wrote some of his profoundest words on style. One critic has tried to conceal his own poverty of ideas by complaining that Stevenson wrote poetry with all his wits about him and therefore wrote inferior poetry. Even if that were true, some passages in the essay on the morality of the profession of letters (*The Art of Writing*) are clear proof that he sometimes had not all his wits about him, in that he knew perfectly well that art was concerned with



matters far more instinctive, fundamental, and inexplicable than the nice choice of epithets and the balance of a clause. In his own telling phrases, he knew that 'a kind of ardour of the blood' was the secret of every attempt to reproduce the 'incommunicable thrill of things'. He knew that craft was not enough. He knew that the 'sedulous ape' business was a mere complement to living in its deepest sense, without any of the cant about a 'brave gymnasium' and 'bracing, manly virtues' which is much less manly than his moods of avowed melancholy. And in some of those moments of greater emotional liberty and tranquillity, he could 'prove upon his pulses' truths about the creation of literature which can never be argued. These were rare moments because it is only rarely that the Scotsman achieves an inner integrity. His watertight compartments are far more stubbornly separate and invincible than those which contain the principles of the easy-going English mind. Non-essentials are capable of fretting and provoking him to a wasteful display of fruitless energy, and Stevenson was by no means exempt from this national failing. At the same time, he could write, in the last-mentioned essay, passages on the deep mystery of the relations between the writer's conscious and unconscious mind which have about them quite the ring of the subjective criticism of Mr. Middleton Murry.

'In all works of art, widely speaking, it is first of all the author's attitude that is narrated. . . . An author who has begged the question and reposes in some narrow faith cannot, if he would, express the whole or even many of the sides of this various existence . . . so that the first duty of any man who is to write is to be intellectual . . . he should recognize from the first that he has only one tool in his workshop, and that tool is sympathy. . . . Literature is written by and for our senses: a sort of internal ear, quick to perceive "unheard melodies" and the eye which directs the pen and deciphers the printed phrase.

We begin to see now what an intricate affair is any perfect passage, how many faculties, whether of taste or pure reason, must be held upon the stretch to make it, and why, when it is made, it should afford us so complete pleasure. From the arrangement of according letters, which is altogether arabesque and sensual, up to the architecture of the elegant and pregnant sentence, which is a vigorous act of the pure intellect, there is scarce a faculty in man but has been exercised.'

Again, we find him writing thus to Will Low:

'Do you remember once consulting me in Paris whether you had not better sacrifice honesty to art; and how, after much confabulation, we agreed that your art would suffer if you did? We decided better than we knew. In this strange welter where we live, all hangs together by a million filaments; and to do reasonably well by others, is the first pre-requisite of art. Art is a virtue; and if I were the man I should be, my art would rise in the proportion of my life.'

That is Stevenson at his best on his art, and in those passages the Daughter of Joy shrinks beside such higher doctrine, to shadowy dimensions, conscious that, at the very height of her profession, she could not have produced such a book as *Weir*, which bears in every paragraph the mark of an artist's integrity. Such a union of wisdom and technical ability is possible only when the artist really lives and does not waste his time and strength in lamenting that to write is not to live in the fullest sense, but rather a trifling occupation for a man, and what had he better do about it? Stevenson certainly had his moments when he proclaimed that he cared far more about living than about writing, but those were not the moments when the highest development of the whole man in him was predominant. Towards the end of his life he might write, 'I ought to have been able to build lighthouses and write *David Balfours* too', but, as Leslie Stephen points out, the very expression of such a wish is a survival of boyhood in the mature man and artist.

It was not a deliberate insincerity any more than were the remarks about having to be positively torn away from his weeding and planting labours at meal-times, remarks which, one Samoan acquaintance declared, were made with an eye to effect. The deplorable doctrine of some actual separation between living and writing could never have taken deep root in him, for he was too essentially an artist to see such boundaries clearly, nor could Scottish education infect him with that academic cowardice which is so fruitful a soil for the doctrine. Although his words may sometimes sound dangerous, and his glorification of sheer incident in fiction may appear a very grave symptom, pseudo-manly theories of what constitutes 'living' did not vitiate his talent as they did vitiate, for example, the talent of that able writer, C. E. Montague, and have weakened and still weaken the critical powers of some of our most pleasant academic men of letters. No insincerity is quite as maddening to those who love literature as that of the writer ashamed of his pen, who completes a creditable piece of work and hastens to cut down trees or erect a fence or, better still, to enlist for any war which happens to be in progress, gleefully exclaiming that now he is a man and has got free of all that rather shady artistic business. But Stevenson understood, in the comparatively rare intervals when his physical and spiritual make-up allowed him to indulge in a wise passiveness, that making sentences is no less ethical than making garden paths. Henry James may have been right in describing him as one who loved only one thing on earth as much as literature, which was the total absence of it, but that does not justify us in thinking that he regarded the holiday moments as part of the vocation or pretended to rank them higher or shared the English cult of the amateur. It is safe to discount the frequently quoted cry, 'Action, Colvin, action!' The

words of an excitable boy recovering slowly from a nervous breakdown caused by living at variance with his father, whom he loved, need not be taken to express a life's philosophy. It is tempting to imagine him in robust health, using the gallant pen of a Nevinson or a Cunningham-Graham in defence of liberty and on behalf of all the oppressed; but it is waste of time. Nor could he have been a Tomlinson; no Tomlinsons come out of Scotland. In maturity, the man knew that the artist's life completely satisfied him, and that any other would have been impossible, that he surrendered willingly to its incessant claims and accepted without regret its discipline of both sense and reason. He was far too honest a writer to fall completely a victim to any odious cant about the superiority of life to literature, or to slander his vocation by insincere pity of the unhappy literary man forced to earn his bread in an unmanly fashion. He might write, as he wrote in *The Wrecker*:

'Those who dwell in clubs or studios may paint excellent pictures or write enchanting novels . . . they should pass no judgment on man's destiny. . . . Their own life is an excrescence of the moment, doomed in the vicissitude of history to pass and disappear; the eternal life of man, spent under sun and rain and in rude physical effort, lies upon one side, scarce changed since the beginning.'

But this was a passing lament for the inadequacy, not the inferiority of art, a recognition of the artist's perpetual but not inglorious failure to translate 'the incommunicable thrill of things', and in the very poignancy of that recognition lies success. If moments did occur when he seemed to glorify the haphazard, short-lived and far more unmanly, in that it is nearer the animal, life of action, so-called, it is easy to trace their origin: rebellion against the limitations of the sick man who must husband his energy

and risk no extensive adventure of body or mind; momentary shrinking from responsibilities and relationships incurred which he had not the strength to bear; above all, that deeper racial quality which he had seen in Knox.

'Like many men, and many Scotchmen, he saw the world and his own heart, not so much under any very steady, equable light, as by extreme flashes of passion, true for the moment, but not true in the long run.'

Just there lies the secret of the artistic failure of the race. When the flashes come, the Scots artist can be more interesting than the English, more vivid, more able to delight our intelligence and to flatter our responsive mental activity. But it is because our intelligence and not our higher wisdom is aroused that he has somewhat failed.

With his excessive individualism, his uneasy blending of racial strains, and his sudden lapse at the moment when he seems to be approaching whatever we mean by the universal, into the local and particular, the Scots writer is the last man to be capable of seeing life steadily and whole. And who could reasonably wish him to be denationalized to a Spenser or an Arnold when he is born a Dunbar or a Stevenson? The steadily-and-whole artists rarely attract affection, and are never, to repeat the dangerous word, interesting; art cannot get on for ever without the heart and the mere intellect coming in, if only to preserve it from too much humbug and pomposity. The stormy, restless race, inclined to the barbaric and the coarse as well as to the fairy legends of the West, cannot help producing art that springs from flashes of passion and not from steady vision and that disinterestedness which seemed to Keats the first and highest quality for man to desire; but at the same time, in the flashes of passion, the race still sees human affairs in the light of eternity and contrives, though almost unconsciously, to apply to art that severest standard. And

I mean 'eternity' in the Christian sense. The irreligious, or anti-religious, or fancy-religious Scottish writer is so entirely out of the racial tradition that he needs to be for ever looking to his laurels; nor need he hope to make a religion of despair and give us books as fervently pessimistic as Mr. Forster's, for that is not the way of his race. At the moment, the most Scottish novels about Scotland are those of Mr. Bruce Marshall, who can easily teach Mr. Linklater that carnality and learning are not enough to make fine stories, although nothing surpasses them for producing typical Scottish art once they are set in a framework of religious doctrine, even if it be Catholic and not Presbyterian. Then they triumph, and drive into obscurity the paganism of Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon—the latter of whom I lament as a brave intelligence lost, but not as a novelist. Bruce Marshall on Edinburgh would have delighted Stevenson, who would have rejected uncompromisingly the amorality of the other novelists I have mentioned. He certainly would not have felt at home with Mr. Marshall's religion, for to the end of his life, when the sight of a figure of the Virgin on a Pacific cliff seemed to him to call for a smile, he retained the anti-Catholic prejudice with which 'Cummy' had infected his childhood; but he would have recognized the author as being, in the words which he himself applied to old Robert Stevenson, 'conscious, like all Scots, of the fragility and unreality of that scene in which we play our uncomprehended parts'. Mr. Marshall's characters, stumbling, falling, and in the miry clay arguing and repenting, would have meant more to the man who created Herrick of *The Ebb-Tide* and James Durie, than any number of magnificent heroes who calmly sin and feel glorious about it.

This, however, is to digress abominably. What remains to be done is to smear the bloom off the peach; to make

the rather absurd attempt to investigate a man's style, knowing all the time that we can never penetrate to the ultimate citadel where the incommunicable essence that *is* the style remains in solitude.

But there is need for some defence of Stevenson's style against judgements which would make it out to be a mere embroidery on no very firm material—or at best, on the material of a rather superficial moralizing. Style is not a collection of phrases, separately as pretty as the pink-tipped daisies hung by a child round the neck of a lifeless doll, but meaningless as factors of a whole ethos; and the difficulty about phrases is singularly evident in Stevenson.

Love of a good phrase is a characteristic usually attributed to the Celt, but I think it is most acutely developed in the Presbyterian Celt. If the world had forgotten that, it got its reminder from Woodrow Wilson; but Wilson's phrases had a force behind them which the world was too cynical to sustain. They were not empty. The Presbyterian glories in a phrase which so neatly and deftly ornaments a box to hold a principle that very soon he judges the empty box to be enough. Sometimes in the past he has been ready to witness the deaths of many opponents, rather than have them live lives hampered by ignorance of his pet phrase of the moment, or by opposition to it. This addiction to phrases comes out in many unexpected places, and is indirectly responsible for 'Bill Crichton would like always to play the game', and 'To die will be an awfully big adventure'.

There are doubtless many instances in Stevenson's writings of this national characteristic, but two have always seemed to me supremely successful. The one occurs in *Aes Triplex*, where a paragraph alluding to Caligula's device of ordering the Praetorian guard to fling the revelling

crowd off the bridge at Baiae concludes with these words:

‘Only, what a chequered picnic we have of it, even while it lasts! and into what great waters, not to be crossed by any swimmer, God’s pale Praetorian throws us over in the end!’

‘God’s pale Praetorian.’ Did the idea thrust itself upward from some long mental accumulation of bits of sermons heard in boyhood? Or did he coin the phrase? He was still a young man when he wrote the essay, and probably he was pleased with the image called up by the words.

The other, and I think the more successful phrase is to be found in *Reflexions and Remarks on Human Life* possibly written at about the same time. In describing his conversion from idleness to a life of purpose, he writes, in words curiously reminiscent of the ‘dedicated spirit’ lines of Wordsworth: ‘I was never conscious of a struggle nor registered a vow, nor seemingly had anything personally to do with the matter. I came about like a well-handled ship. There stood at the wheel that unknown steersman whom we call God.’

‘That unknown steersman whom we call God’—happy the Presbyterian minister who sees such a phrase suddenly appearing upon his sermon paper, the fruit of some wild corybantic orgy in the temple of his racial goddess Style. So deeply, we see, thanks perhaps to direct heredity on the Balfour side, thanks to his being familiar with Patrick Walker and Howie of Lochgoin and other Covenanting writers to whom he ascribed his own cadences, was there ingrained the idiom of that pulpit eloquence which has been for Scotland the permanent and infallible literary criterion. In England, where to say that a writer had style meant for generations that he wrote as though he imagined he were Cicero, charm and grace would be the last elements readers would expect in a literary man who



announced that he was seeking his models in seventeenth-century Puritan moralists; but the story is different in Scotland where the sense of continuity is so much stronger. In the fragment of *Heathercat*, that story of the killing time which might have come to something big because of the obviously loyal love and knowledge of the time and of the district, which make up for the rather loveless and arid characterization of the few chapters, Stevenson set down his own description of the style of covenanting preachers:

‘An occasional pathos of simple humanity, frequent patches of big Biblical words, relieved the homely tissue. It was a poetry apart, bleak, austere, but genuine, and redolent of the soil.’

To illustrate the affinity between a slightly later and more subdued example of this style and the general run or lilt of Stevenson’s rhythm, I should like to give part of a quotation cited in an interesting article on *Calvin and Scottish Art and Letters*.<sup>1</sup>

‘Thus was I by all-wise providence yoked with my wife with whom I have now, by the mercy of God, lived thirty years complete; a woman of great worth, whom I therefore passionately loved, and inwardly honoured; a stately, beautiful, and comely person, truly pious, and fearing the Lord; of an evenly temper, patient in our common tribulations, and under her present distresses. . . . I have sometimes been likely to be removed from her; she having had little continued health, except the first six weeks, her death hath sometimes stared us in the face, and hundreds of arrows have pierced my heart on that score; and sometimes I have gone with a trembling heart to the pulpit, laying my account with being called out of it to see her expire.’ (*Memoirs of Thomas Boston of Etterick*, 1730.)

Any ear accustomed to the Stevensonian idiom will quickly pick out such phrases as ‘patient in our common tribulations, and under her present distresses’ (*Prayers*

<sup>1</sup> M. P. Ramsay, *Scottish Bookman*, October 1935.

written at Vailima, for a ducat!), the 'hundreds of arrows', the 'laying my account with being called out of it to see her expire'. We talk solemnly about the immeasurable influence of the Authorized Version and the Prayer Book on English style, but any modern English writer as transparently derivative from them as was Stevenson from the religious writings of his own country, would be classified as tiresomely affected. Perhaps the Scotsman who writes has to be resigned to being never wholly free from affectation. He is writing a foreign language, of course, cries the Nationalist; but even so, we have to allow for the tendency to eloquence which can rise to *Wandering Willie's Tale* as surely as it can sink to Ian Maclaren's remarks on hearing of Stevenson's death, which open with a terrible 'One came in with omens of sadness on his face . . .'. It can afflict us with a dreadful pompously facetious jargon as surely as it can nobly inspire us with the concluding paragraph of *Pulvis et Umbra*. It brings the technical phrases of theology and the law into queer and disreputable haunts where their English sisters would never be found wandering, so familiar to a small people are the sacred institutions of a country loved with bigoted devotion. Self-expression is a ritual to the Scot, even his intonations, the gutturals of the Clyde, the pure vowels of the Highlander, the 'crisp Edinburgh accent' which Stevenson himself never lost, seem a hundredfold more capable of expressing his sardonic realism than the unmodulated dialect of the South. Consider, for example, how perfectly words and accent are fitted in some of the observations of that appalling old grandfather who appears in Mr. J. R. Allan's *Farmer's Boy* and other writings:

'Damn't'—when reproached by his wife for reckless driving—  
—'if I've got tae dee some day I nicht as weel dee in style.'

'Aye'—to his grandson when about to make a snow man—

'and mak' it like the Minister. It'll be cauld and cauld eneuch but never half as cauld as him.'

Throwing the whole of himself into a conversation or the telling of a story, the Scot usually manages to find the convincing phrase and the inevitable word. No wonder Stevenson was so unfortunately devoted to those unpleasant words 'gusto', 'droll', and 'racy'; there appear to be no satisfying alternatives to them when describing Scottish talk or manners. They are horrible words; but we know what he meant. That national quality of 'derisive intelligence' which a hardened lecturer owned that he always saw and dreaded in a Scots audience, forges a serviceable weapon, and that is style.

Here are a few of Stevenson's phrases chosen at random as I turn over pages of notes: 'an irrational and supporting sense of duty done', 'a heady sensuality of scorn', 'alive and young, coloured with the bright hues of life', 'the mind besieged by tumultuous and crying memories', 'some wilful illegality of nature', 'a grinding monotony of peril', 'the elegant and moving aridity of ancient art', 'all the hollow of heaven was one chaos of contending luminaries'. There are also some which have become classic, the 'bright face of danger', the 'faithful failure'; but the theory that nothing mattered to him except the adjective, and when once that had been painstakingly chosen, the rest of the sentence could look after itself, will not hold water. Stevenson's prose is no collection of phrases, embedded like museum relics, on any dull background; it is a prose which often cries to be read aloud if the true force of its cadence is to be felt. It is not the adjectives which make it impossible to stop reading *Weir*, at whatever point you may take up the story; certainly they are often wonderfully chosen, but they are not bestowed with any feverish abandon. Opening the book at random, I have to read for

several pages before I find even 'unconsenting pleasure and unreasoning fear' (applied to the 'stupor' in which Christina lies dreaming of Archie), and these are mediocre examples of that startling unexpectedness which has somehow come to be associated with his idea of *le mot juste*. And so we find that it is the rhythmical quality, a kind of singing or declaiming which probably had its origin in the fusion of some remote Celtic influence with deep study of the Bible, the melody and movement of the prose which fascinate us even more than the sudden rich depths of meaning which some casual adjective may offer. It should never be forgotten that *Weir* was a book dictated, and although Stevenson commented on the very fact of dictation as a drawback to the style of *St. Ives*, it would seem, with the later book, to have been a positive advantage, endowing the movement of the story with a flexibility and a variety of speed which he had never before achieved except in a few passages in *The Ebb-Tide*. If you take the opening of the chapter which described Archie's walk to church on that fateful morning, or the passage describing Kirstie's state of mind before she decides to have her midnight interview with him, you will find, I think, that you want to read such prose aloud, for you are understanding it by hearing it mentally. His own words for this were 'a sort of internal ear quick to perceive "unheard melodies"'. This may or may not mean that it is qualified to be called 'poetry' by those critics who think it is a compliment to fiction to call it by some other name; it certainly does mean that the style is very beautiful and uncommon, and is making its emotional appeal to you from a level which fiction does not often reach. There is only one living English novelist who can write a style, Mr. Compton Mackenzie, but although his prose is enchanting, I do not often wish to read it aloud. I yield to none in admiration

of the best of Arnold Bennett, but to read him aloud would be about as aesthetically exciting as to recite a few pages of Bradshaw. I am proud to think that my generation, the 'lost generation', can claim so rare a prophetic mind as Mr. Huxley's, but I should shrink from reading him aloud, not only because so many names might occur which I could not pronounce without the help of the B.B.C., but because I fear he might scathingly and sadly find some sinister meaning in the act. But I imagine that an evening spent by a company reading Stevenson aloud would easily become one of those feasts which made his admired Herrick and his friends 'nobly wild, not mad'. Such essays as *Old Mortality* and *Pulvis et Umbra* would yield new passion and new thought; various pieces of landscape painting and weather effects would make a peculiarly Scottish contribution; and finally, *Weir* would carry us into the region where, faced by integrity, mere criticism by the intelligence dies.

Thou shalt remain, in face of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man . . .

But when all is said and done, the school and foundation of this style is the sermon. Take the following passage from *Lay Morals* and consider how easy it is to imagine it spoken from some pulpit in a Scottish voice, slow, desperately serious, very conscious of Time's wingèd chariot. (The point of accent is not a petty one. If you hear a congregation sing

Behold the mountain of the Lor-r-d  
In latter-r days shall r-rise,

you know that you are in touch with a very different mentality from that of the folk who render it

Behold the mountain of the Lawd  
In lattah days shall rise.)

'God, if there be any God, speaks daily in a new language by the tongues of men; the thoughts and habits of each fresh generation and each new-coined spirit throw another light upon the universe and contain another commentary on the printed Bibles; every scruple, every true dissent, every glimpse of something new, is a letter of God's alphabet. . . . Perhaps in your dim way, like a child who delivers a message not fully understood, you are opening wider the straits of prejudice and preparing mankind for some truer and more spiritual grasp of truth; perhaps, as you stand forth for your own judgment, you are covering a thousand weak ones with your body; perhaps, by this declaration alone, you have avoided the guilt of false witness against humanity and the little ones unborn. It is good, I believe, to be respectable, but much nobler to respect oneself and utter the voice of God. . . . For when will men receive that first part and prerequisite of truth, that, by the order of things, by the greatness of the universe, by the darkness and partiality of man's experience, by the inviolate secrecy of God, kept close in His most open revelations, every man is, and to the end of ages must be, wrong? Wrong to the universe, wrong to mankind, wrong to God.'

And if the passionate earnestness of that and of the conclusion of *Pulvis et Umbra* do not trace their descent directly from pulpit eloquence, if not from the outlaw sermons of Hugh Renwick or some other preacher hunted on the moors in the 'killing time', I know nothing about Scotland. Two hundred years before, John Stevenson, a working farmer in Carrick, had known emotional storms which kept him praying in the fields at midnight, his prayer a matter of painful ejaculations—'Lord, pity! . . . Lord, help!'—and his enigmatical descendant rose to the full height of his style when he wrote from the same darkness. And yet readers remember 'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum', and think the pirate-fancier overshadowed the man who wrote 'Thou of the vast designs in which we blindly labour . . .'.

There can be no doubt that the cadences peculiar to Stevenson's prose are largely due to the fact that some of his models were the Covenanting authors read aloud to him in his childhood, and to the other fact that the habit of pulpit eloquence has left its indelible mark on all Scottish prose style. In those novels where he affected an eighteenth-century idiom, the rhythm of the sentences is much tighter and brisker. They do not mount, with a lilt of song in them, towards a climax and then drop wistfully down to silence as typical sentences in the essays mount and fall. Take, for example, this from *Old Mortality*:

'So that at the last, when such a pin falls out—when there vanishes in the least breath of time one of those rich magazines of life on which we draw for our supply—when he who had first dawned upon us as a face among the faces of the city, and still growing, came to bulk on our regard with those clear features of the loved and living man, falls in a breath to memory and shadow, there falls along with him a whole wing of the palace of our life.'

Unencumbered by superfluous adjectives, it swings up to 'memory and shadow', two impressive and moving words, and then closes on a regretful sigh. That is the movement most familiar to those who observe his idiosyncrasies, and it is a pleasure to read such prose aloud. It is meant to be read thus—it is, as Lamb said, when translating Horace, 'properer for a sermon', but a sermon, much less a symphony, cannot be built up out of endless repetition, and those passages are almost too rare. Sometimes in a letter a gale of ecstatic moralizing carries him away, and then we find him achieving rhythmical effects of his best, as in the following passage:

'Yes, if I could believe in the immortality business, the world would indeed be too good to be true; but we were put here to do what service we can, for honour and not for hire: the sods cover us, and the worm that never dies, the conscience, sleeps well at

last; these are the wages, besides what we receive so lavishly day by day; and they are enough for a man who knows his own frailty and sees all things in the proportion of reality. The soul of piety was killed long ago by that idea of reward. Nor is happiness, whether eternal or temporal, the reward that mankind seeks. Happinesses are but his wayside campings; his soul is in the journey; he was born for the struggle, and only tastes his life in effort and on the condition that he is opposed. How, then, is such a creature, so fiery, so pugnacious, so made up of discontent and aspiration, and such noble and uneasy passions—how can he be rewarded but by rest? I would not say it aloud; for man's cherished belief is that he loves that happiness which he continually spurns and passes by; and this belief in some ulterior happiness exactly fits him. He does not require to stop and taste it; he can be about the rugged and bitter business where his heart lies; and yet he can tell himself this fairy tale of an eternal tea-party, and enjoy the notion that he is both himself and something else; and that his friends will yet meet him, all ironed out and emasculate, and still be lovable—as if love did not live in the faults of the beloved only, and draw its breath in an unbroken round of forgiveness! But the truth is, we must fight until we die; and when we die there can be no quiet for mankind but complete resumption into what?—God, let us say—when all these desperate tricks will lie spellbound at last.'

Little as avail comparisons, it is interesting to consider Stevenson in relation to the contemporary who also is first introduced to us in our youth wearing the 'stylist' label—in relation to Pater. Everything combines to keep them separate—race, religion, education, and environment—and no one could have been less attracted than Stevenson (or is it better to say 'more repelled'?) by the contemplation of 'brilliant sins' and 'exquisite passions', or by the pastime of for ever discriminating some passionate attitude in those about us. Not for the native of Edinburgh are such diversions possible.

Phrases, certainly, were not a great temptation to Pater.



None but the 'white bird' jumps to my mind when I stop to consider *Marius*. His is most emphatically a written style, a style read with the eye and seldom heard. If music will allow the metaphor, Pater's prose suggests an infinity of organ or piano instead of the wilder possibilities of orchestration to be discovered in Stevenson. It is safe, careful writing—far more, one might have thought, the prose of a sick man than those lightly moving and supple moralizings. In such a sentence as the following we feel a stuffiness and lack of movement, the result of which is that a book by Pater remains in the memory as a series of chunks and slabs, lacking the fluidity and the human rise and fall of such prose as Stevenson's.

'For still, in a shadowy world, his deeper wisdom had ever been, with a sense of economy, with a jealous estimate of gain and loss, to use life, not as the means to some problematic end, but, as far as might be, from dying hour to dying hour, an end in itself—a kind of music, all-sufficing to the duly trained ear, even as it died on the air.'

However opinions on his works may change, Stevenson's power of describing scenery and weather has never been questioned. The talent for this is strong in the race. The language not only abounds, as he pointed out in his *Edinburgh*, in words applicable to bleakness and storm, but allows us to have our 'bonny Doon' and to apply from the heart the same sentimental but expressive adjective to any favourite piece of scenery. Stevenson loved

... dew, frost and mountains, fire and trees,  
Tumultuary silences,  
Winds that in darkness fied a tune,  
And the high-rising virgin moon,

and he wrote of them with a faithful devotion which could interpret colour, form, and sound with a rare delicacy. A whole anthology relating to the winds of Edinburgh alone

might be compiled from his works. Descriptive touches and passages abound in his letters; particularly in youth, when nature, though to his mind an unspiritual power, could always soothe both nerves and body, and again in the Pacific days, when the wonder of colour and light such as he had never seen before, inspired him to paint pictures full of detail of the tiny shell and the lofty palm.

'He looked round him, breathing deep of earth's plain fragrance; he looked up into the great array of heaven and was quieted. His little turgid life dwindled to its true proportions; and he saw himself . . . stand like a speck under the cool cupola of the night.'

This he wrote of Otto, and in many other places, indirectly, of himself. One of the instances of his descriptive power is the passage in *Travels with a Donkey* which challenges the secret of that strange movement in the night when a change seems, to those out of doors, to pass over the face of the sleeping earth; but as it is well known, the reader can turn to it in its context, among countless happy touches which describe that windy, bare, leaf-strewn French country-side. I have chosen instead, for quotation, a passage from *The Silverado Squatters* in which he remarkably conveys the radiance and colours of that phenomenon perhaps dearest of all to him—a starry sky.

'The sky itself was of a ruddy, powerful, nameless changing colour, dark and glossy like a serpent's back. The stars, by innumerable millions, stuck boldly forth like lamps. The milky way was bright, like a moonlit cloud; half heaven seemed milky way. The greater luminaries shone each more clearly than a winter's moon. Their light was dyed in every sort of colour—red, like fire; blue, like steel, green, like the tracks of sunset, and so sharply did each stand forth in its own lustre that there was no appearance of that flat, star-spangled arch we know so well in pictures, but all the hollow of heaven was one chaos of contending luminaries—a hurly-burly of stars. . . .

Yet a while, and, as we turned a corner, a great leap of silver light and net of forest shadows fell across the road and upon our wondering waggonful; and, swimming low among the trees, we beheld a strange, misshapen waning moon, half-tilted on her back.'

And although it is certainly one of his purple patches, and although I very much doubt if one night in the forest would have so instantly converted the pathetically lifeless Seraphina, I cannot help quoting from *Prince Otto* part of the famous account of the dawn.

'At last she began to be aware of a wonderful revelation. . . . The countenance with which the pines regarded her began insensibly to change; the grass, too, short as it was, and the whole winding staircase of the brook's course, began to wear a solemn freshness of appearance. . . . She looked all about; the whole face of nature looked back, brimful of meaning, finger on lip, leaking its glad secret. She looked up. Heaven was almost emptied of stars. Such as still lingered shone with a changed and waning brightness, and began to faint in their stations. And the colour of the sky itself was the most wonderful, for the rich blue of the night had now melted and softened and brightened, and there had succeeded in its place a hue that has no name, and that is never seen but as the herald of morning. "O!" she cried, joy catching at her voice, "O! it is the dawn!"'

'Out of the East it welled and whitened; the darkness trembled into light; and the stars were extinguished like the street lamps of a human city. The whiteness brightened into silver, the silver warmed into gold, the gold kindled into pure and living fire; and the face of the East was barred with elemental scarlet. The day drew its first long breath, steady and chill; and for leagues around the woods sighed and shivered. And then, at one bound, the day had floated up, and her startled eyes received day's first arrow, and quailed under the buffet. On every side, the shadows leaped from their ambush and fell prone. The day was come, plain and garish; and up the steep and solitary eastern heaven, the sun, victorious over his competitors, continued slowly and royally to mount.'

It is, apart from the unfortunate 'finger on lip, leaking its glad secret', rich in felicitous expression, true and careful in its observation of light and shadow, restrained and yet abounding. A mere statement of an unchanging natural process, it is written, we feel from that lingering cadence in its style, with an emotional enthusiasm which he was not for several more years to succeed in lavishing freely upon the human affections and agonies of his characters. This, the reader feels, was written with pleasure and without strain.

Of actual descriptions of Scottish scenery we find few, and those entirely free from the tiresome glamour the modern traveller tries to convey. What he wrote of Edinburgh goes into a class by itself. No one has ever approached it, and it may be doubted if any one ever will approach it. There is the mannered simplicity of the youthful *Picturesque Notes*, in which the good little boy shakes his head over Presbyterian hatreds and moralizes in the graveyard; there are the passionate elegiacs in which, when he was at last succeeding in striking a more spontaneous note, he wrote of his birth-place from the other side of the world. The pictures to be collected from each form a gallery of intensely individual impressions which never fail to 'awaken the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom' and refuse to be drearily merged in the grand chorus of inane commonplaces which vainly threaten one of Britain's two most overwritten cities.

'I was born within the walls of that dear city of Zeus, of which the lightest and (when he chooses) the tenderest singer of my generation sings so well. I was born likewise within the bounds of an earthly city, illustrious for her beauty, her tragic and picturesque associations, and for the credit of some of her brave sons. Writing as I do in a strange quarter of the world, and a late day of my age, I can still behold the profile of her towers and chimneys, and the long trail of her smoke

against the sunset; I can still hear those strains of martial music that she goes to bed with, ending each day, like an act of an opera, to the notes of bugles; still recall, with a grateful effort of memory, any one of a thousand beautiful and specious circumstances that pleased me, and that must have pleased anyone, in my half-remembered past. It is the beautiful rock that I thus actively recall; the august airs of the castle on its rock, nocturnal passages of lights and trees, the sudden song of the blackbird in a suburban lane, rosy and dusky winter sunsets, the uninhabited splendours of the early dawn, the building up of the city on a misty day, house above house, spire above spire, until it was received into a sky of softly glowing clouds, and seemed to pass on and upwards, by fresh grades and rises, city beyond city, a New Jerusalem, boldly scaling heaven. . . .'

Apart from a score of the tiniest vignettes of the villages and small towns of Fife, Stevenson may be said to have neglected his own land with his eyes, if never with his heart; but he left one short essay, *Memoirs of an Islet*, merely a slight sketch of Earraid, the engineers' head-quarters during the building of the light on Dhu Heartach, and in its very simple paragraphs he contrived to express to perfection the charm of the Western Isles. In comparison with the modern rhapsodies, his prose seems bare, but, because memory brought back vividly the lad that was gone and the irrevocable radiance that is part even of youth's misery (and he was not miserable in Earraid), the essay was written in a pure simplicity which communicates frankly to the reader the recollected emotion.

'But it was in Earraid itself that I delighted chiefly. The lighthouse settlement scarce encroached beyond its fences; over the top of the first brae the ground was all virgin, the world all shut out, the face of things unchanged by any of man's doings. Here was no living presence, save for the limpets on the rocks, for some old, gray, rain-beaten ram that I might rouse out of a ferny den betwixt two boulders, or for the haunting and the piping of the gulls. It was older than man; it was found so by incoming Celts, and seafaring Norsemen, and

Columba's priests. The earthy savour of the bog plants, the rude disorder of the boulders, the inimitable seaside brightness of the air, the brine and the iodine, the lap of the billows among the weedy reefs, the sudden springing up of a great run of dashing surf along the sea-front of the Isle, all that I saw and felt my predecessors must have seen and felt with scarce a difference. I steeped myself in open air and in past ages.

'Delightful would it be to me to be in *Uchd Ailiun*

On the pinnacle of a rock,

That I might often see

The face of the ocean;

That I might hear the song of the wonderful birds,

Source of happiness;

That I might hear the thunder of the crowding waves

Upon the rocks:

At times at work without compulsion—

This would be delightful;

At times plucking dulse from the rocks,

At times at fishing.

'So, about the next island of Iona, sang Columba himself twelve hundred years before. And so might I have sung of Earraid.'

Moralist though he was, Stevenson saw the artist as the *artifex* and not as the prophet; but there was nothing of the Pre-Raphaelite about him, nothing of the 'aesthetic'. He stands aloof from the dogmatic culture of the seventies and eighties, and when he did meet celebrities in London and plunge delightedly into the life of the Savile Club, he must have appeared as a vagabond from some unfamiliar region. This was partly due to his being one of those persons who obviously carry their own universe about with them and always bear some sign of being denizens of its undivulged recesses who gaze upon their own stars. In this universe walks some spirit which is that person's—or perhaps is not that person's, or perhaps, as Stevenson himself wrote, 'that little, beautiful brother whom we once all had and whom

we have all lost and mourned, the man we ought to have been, the man we hoped to be'. And when the two meet, a book is written. Any conflict between the two is very bitter, any sympathy singularly sweet. In Stevenson there was a deep separation between the two and he knew it.

. . . All year long upon the stage  
I dance and tumble and do rage  
So vehemently I scarcely see  
The inner and eternal me.

I have a temple I do not  
Visit, a heart I have forgot,  
A self that I have never met,  
A secret shrine . . .

But there was a more mundane reason for his remaining aloof from a world of aesthetic principles whose lawgivers were Arnold and Pater. Scotland had no need of campaigns launched from Oxford against 'the hideous and grotesque illusions of middle-class Protestantism'. Whatever its faults may be, Scottish Calvinism would never have presented to Arnold's unwilling eyes 'that sort of machinery of business, chapels, tea-meetings, and addresses from Mr. Murphy, which makes the dismal and illiberal life on which I have so often touched'. Scotland had no gentlemanly or ungentlemanly religion, and its very Puritanism was worn with a dignity, a force of personality, and a queer, ferocious humour whose like could not have been traced in most English Nonconformists. I wonder what part in the struggle between religion and culture Arnold would have given to such lines as:

We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o' it,  
We're a' dry wi' drinkin' o' it,  
The minister kissed the fiddler's wife,  
And he couldna' preach for thinkin' o' it.

The Kirk certainly destroyed aestheticism, but that

it successfully destroyed culture (in literature, at least) is stated to-day with perhaps too frequent an emphasis. Although the tranquil, sun-warmed faith of a George MacDonald is scarcely characteristically Scottish, neither would be the melancholy of a Cowper dogged by Evangelical horrors, for the sickness of such a one would always be assuaged by the bright flowers of fancy which grow on every stricken battle-field of the north and may be picked, such is the privilege of a small race, by every member of it and not by any favoured few. At any rate, when Stevenson was young, however different the tale may be to-day, Presbyterianism was still capable of drawing from the beholder a fervent 'From scenes like these . . .'. He was entirely unacquainted with the form of Philistinism which cultured England was then sworn to combat, and he remained aloof from the debate as he remained aloof from all contemporary fashions of thought. If, for example, he ever bestowed any attention on *The New Republic*, he would derive little pleasure from it, for the boyish strain in his temperament was not that of the undergraduate dearly loving the intellectual joke. Old racial affinity—and who knows what diffusion from the remote French element on the Balfour side?—cherishing grace and logic, turned him to French masters as much as to English, and his innate solitariness severed him from 'schools' and 'tendencies'.

Then there is what I can only call his ignoring of that great grand central stream of English literature on which text-books are written. Persons who are not bookish can read Stevenson with equanimity because they know that they will not be exhorted to worship John Clare, or *Persuasion*, or Blake, or Mark Rutherford. They will never be made to feel uneducated. His freedom from all conventional modes of thought and stock critical gestures



endears him to many readers without for a moment alienating those who have been shepherded safely across academic pastures. Some few faint echoes of Shakespeare's phrases, and references to Defoe, slighter references to the eighteenth-century novelists, a whisper of Wordsworth, a suspicion of Keats and Shelley—so much and no more one gathers from the letters; set off, of course, by a most adequate knowledge of his French contemporaries and of Scottish history. Contemporary fiction now deemed to be of the most mediocre he would read (particularly during that bad invalid period of the eighties, though he never lost the taste) for the sake of adventure and episode, reserving his more ecstatic admiration for James and Meredith because, the one soundly and the other falsely, they provided in their work the element of character which remained until the last few years an element he was not sufficiently mature to achieve or did not trust himself to attempt. 'Character to the boy is a sealed book, for him a pirate is a beard, a pair of wide trousers, and a liberal complement of pistols.' Hence his perfectly genuine and unaffected wonder, which doubtless enhanced his joy in reading work already interesting in form. But unbookish he remained to the end, his unschooled taste an inspiration to the journalistic or the donnish elements in his friends, individual without crankiness, unlettered because he was so essentially a master of letters.

'The essential part of work', he wrote once when explaining how slow a worker he was, 'is not an act, it is a state'. He was always talking—not always talking about himself, as some think, but talking about life from his angle, a very different thing. As James pointed out, he 'made no business of confessions', though he could talk away to the last ditch, self-expressing but not equally self-revealing. He was no Tchekov, no Keats, capable of

standing apart from self-analysis with a noble unconsciousness of self; he was too Scottish to expose the processes of his inner life. The Scot is secretive. Art, he knew all through his more than usual organic sensibility, 'was more than technique'; he was perfectly aware of the pains and difficulties which, particularly where the artist is concerned, must 'school an intelligence and make it a soul', but the teaching of John Calvin does not encourage a man to view his own spiritual processes as anything more magnificent than a 'weary pilgrimage', or to explore too far, flushed with transcendental pride, the slopes which tempt the impious foot towards mere humanism. So that all that the author of 'a few books for boys' allowed himself to say was, 'Art is a virtue; and if I were the man I should be, my art would rise in the proportion of my life', and then got to his day's work.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MAN AND THE SCOT

'People were fond of him, and people were proud of him; his achievements, as it were, sensibly raised their pleasure in the world, and, to them, became part of themselves. . . . It is not every success which has these beneficent results.'

ANDREW LANG ON R. L. S.

'A Scotchman is vain, interested in himself and others, eager for sympathy.'

R. L. S., *The Foreigner at Home (Memories and Portraits)*.

'Persons of this nation are particularly fond of affirming a truth—which nobody doubts. They do not so properly affirm, as annunciate it.'

LAMB, *Imperfect Sympathies*.

AN unemployed psychologist might do worse than write a whole pamphlet on authors' names, with particular reference to Stevenson. The light essayist, searching for a subject, can always produce a few paragraphs on what the course of English poetry might have been had Shelley's friends called him 'Percy' instead of 'Bysshe,' and I have sometimes wondered if Miss Edith Sitwell is forced to sink to the unworthy level of her gibes at Arnold merely because she has some primitive antipathy to the name Matthew. It is all very illogical, no doubt, but it is a pleasant subject to sport with. Why, for example, am I glad that I do not have to read the works of John Lamb or Charles Keats? But there is more than sport in considering the position of a man who, like Stevenson, uses a full-length literary and professional signature, is known to countless admirers by the triple initials of that signature, and yet, in private life, answers to only the second name of the three, and then spells it one way and pronounces it another.

In her bewilderment over Absolute and Beverley, Mrs. Malaprop cried, 'You are not Cerberus—three gentlemen in one?'. But Stevenson was Cerberus with a vengeance, and if we are to view Robert Louis Stevenson as a shade,

then his initials represent merely the shadow of a shade, and we are left with the equivocal 'Louis' alone. The whole matter of his second name is worth notice because it throws light on the Scottish propensity for making a desperate fuss about something non-essential and calling the result earnestness. I hardly think that in a country less weakened than Scotland by fear of public opinion, it would have been necessary to have the spelling, but not the pronunciation, of your son's name altered, lest any should be led, by association of ideas, to think of a fellow citizen, an abominable Radical, named Lewis. It is a very curious matter altogether. We remember how Frank Innes said, 'I know Weir, but I never met Archie'. Travelling from one alias to another must have had its own temptations, and while R. L. S. pontificated about cheerfulness, Louis uttered strange oaths, while in the distant background there still remained Lou, the solitary child in bed with a temperature.

One outspoken acquaintance of Samoan days has declared that he was sometimes amazed at the 'pettinesses' of which Stevenson was capable and attributes these to feminine domestic pressure, but I wonder if they were not rather instances of this Scottish preoccupation with trifles. It is so characteristic of the race, and sometimes it has its serious side. In my time I have been irritated by the spectacle of respectable citizens down the Clyde vehemently arguing that it was an outrage to paint the funnels of various steamers the same colour as a result of the unification of railways; but as years pass by and Scotland's plight becomes no better, I seem to see that outcry as a rather pathetic evidence of a desire to clutch at a vanishing national self-consciousness, embodied in the fact that when a railway policy was not dictated from London, the varying colours of trains and steamers kept alive a sentiment expressed in the eighteenth-century epithets, 'Caledonian' and 'North British'.

I suppose no one is more weary and intolerant of the legendary 'charm' than is the true Stevensonian. Perhaps there is only one other phrase more calculated to make him 'grue', and that is 'puckish humour'. Not that he wishes to deny any item in the chronicle of fascination or blot out one episode from the recollections of friends and acquaintances. He is, or should be, aflame with a proper desire to combat Mr. Frank Swinnerton's assertion that the famous 'charm' produces in most readers 'a vague doting that is entirely uncritical'. Perhaps they are sceptical about Mr. Swinnerton's own standards of criticism, noting that he considers that to Stevenson 'God was a kindly, well-intentioned person of infinite mercy', which suggests that Mr. Swinnerton did not quite know where to find the most reliable information on Presbyterianism. No, the true admirer is heartily sick of the legend. Being in possession of Henley's sonnet, he feels how superfluous is all the appendix of chatter about the velvet coat and the cigarettes in the long fingers and the gesticulations and even, almost, the expressive eyes. He hates all this decoration as much as he hates the calendars and the framed and illuminated quotations about a happy man or woman being a better thing to find than a five-pound note, which are so insulting to the artist and represent the man in his less inspired moments. He prefers to the statement about the five-pound note the passage in a letter, 'I do not write for the public, I do write for money, a nobler deity, and most of all for myself', either because he likes to feel his hero has come down from the heights to his side, or because he recognizes that although he was an artist, the greatest artist who has yet come out of Scotland, Stevenson was no fool, but possessed his own share of the shrewdness of his race.

It does not seem probable, however, that posterity will ever be able to dismiss this 'charm' tradition, nor, I think,

would there be any gain to literature if it were dismissed. We are faced with an enormous mass of evidence, all going to prove that this was a man who attracted 99 per cent. of those who met him, arousing in them an enthusiastic affection, drawing them out until they told him the stories of their lives and found these perhaps inglorious sagas received with sympathy and intuition. Nor was this the testimony merely of some intellectual or artistic coterie, united to him by strong bonds of culture, for 'cultured' he never was, nor were any of his closest friends and chief correspondents except Gosse, for we cannot apply that epithet to the artists proper, Henry James, Will Low, and Bob Stevenson, and Henley was a journalist. I have purposely omitted Meredith, for he wrote nothing except *Love in the Valley* worthy of the admiration Stevenson lavished on him, and it is surprising that the younger man, ethically so much sounder, never really saw through the pretentious heartlessness of the tyrant of Box Hill. No, the testimonies to his attractiveness came from men of every type whom he had met on his wanderings and in every kind of halting-place by the road of life. Nor had the readers who admired or adored him while he lived, the advantage of reading his letters and other pieces of self-revelation published years later. Charm, of course, in a Scotsman, is a bit of a puzzle. There we might expect the delight which can be derived from watching a keen mentality at work, but 'charm' implies more than that. There should be underneath it an integrity which the mere brain cannot achieve. Sometimes in acknowledging it we are acknowledging that the man who possesses it has his own religion in his secret heart and is carrying the white bird across the crowded market-place. Such a picture of 'charm' would imply that it contained as one ingredient humility, and alas, the late Professor Raleigh has told us that Stevenson was a lesser man than

Henley because he 'was not humble'. Surely Raleigh knew a little more about Scotland than to wonder at that. 'I am only a humble Presbyterian', said the speaker on the platform filled with celebrities of most denominations, and, 'I must turn aside and see this great sight', was the comment of the speaker who followed him.

Although I hope I am as far as anybody can be from the 'plaster saint' attitude, I see no cause for gratitude to these people who have imagined they were looking at every action in the light of common sense when they succeeded in belittling it. Such realists are very anxious to prove that it was no white bird but a particularly gaudy and strident cockatoo which Stevenson carried across the market-place, and to every mention of a kind act on his part they firmly reply '*Poseur!*' Even if he did write a long letter to Mrs. Sitwell about it, I can never see that that invalidates the motive which led to the familiar incident of his trying once in the early seventies to find the home of a lost child in the middle of the night. She was his only confidante, and I have never been able to see the romantic theatricality of such a simple act, even if carried out in surroundings of comparative squalor which might profitably inspire a young man steeped in Balzac. He was kind, and therefore, having been sheltered from every hurt in his own childhood, he had to find out what was wrong with Master Tommy Murphy and do his best to help him.

If this kindness was half the obvious and external side of his charm, I suppose the other half was courage; but there is a kindness which lacks all the grace which only imaginative sympathy can bestow, and there is a courage, particularly a courage shown by some in illness, whose hard infallibility takes no account of the weaker brethren. Stevenson never for a moment pretended that he had good health, and I do not think we should admire him any more if he

had. The *locus classicus* for his expression of his own valuation of the chronically invalid existence to which he was condemned, particularly in the years, 1880-7, is the correspondence with William Archer, who had criticized, in an article in *Time*, the questionable soundness of the Stevensonian gospel of joy, assuming that its preacher was a hearty and robust 'athletico-aesthete'. It is in one of these letters that we find the passage 'To me the medicine bottles on my chimney and the blood on my handkerchief are accidents; they do not colour my view of life . . . it has not hurt, it has not changed me in any essential part'. A piece of well-meant bravado; for it is too obvious that every book he wrote during that period would have been different (if, indeed, some of them had been written at all) if written by a man who could still take even moderate walks or paddle a canoe. In every paragraph written by a man leading that restricted life there are the marks, however faint, of experiences and of struggles between soul and body of which the healthy man knows nothing, and such marks cannot be effaced. And in another letter we have the distressing passage I have elsewhere quoted on gay, bright words and pictures, and the delightful service which art performs in creating such and keeping the world in a perpetual *Christmas Carol* atmosphere. Very gallant, some may say, but not for a moment to be seriously considered, not on a level with the other kind of courage which he had shown when he was down and out in San Francisco and sketched his own epitaph and the first draft of *Requiem*.

'Sketch of my tomb follows:

Robert Louis Stevenson,  
born 1850, of a family of engineers,  
died . . .

*"Nitor aquis"*



Home is the sailor, home from sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.

'You who pass this grave, put aside hatred: love kindness; be all services remembered in your heart and all offences pardoned; and as you go down again among the living, let this be your question: Can I make someone happier this day before I lie down to sleep? Thus the dead man speaks to you from the dust: you will hear no more from him.

'Who knows, Colvin, but I may thus be of more use when I am buried than ever when I was alive. The more I think of it, the more earnestly do I desire this. I may perhaps try to write it better some day, but that is what I want in sense. The verses are from a beayootiful poem by me.'

There is nothing else in our literature which comes so near being an echo of:

'If I should die, said I to myself, I have left no immortal work behind me, nothing to make my friends proud of my memory, but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time, I would have made myself remembered.'

He knew, and openly stated, more about himself and his art in those grim days than he overlooked when he lived in *Skerryvore* 'like a weevil in a biscuit'.

'I care for nothing but the moral and the dramatic, not a jot for the picturesque or the beautiful, other than about people.'

'I believe the class of work I *might* yet give out is better and more real and solid than people fancy.'

'So I learn day by day the value and high doctrinality of suffering. Let me suffer always; not more than I am able to bear, for that makes a man mad . . . but still to suffer some, and never to sink up to my eyes in comfort and grow dead in virtues and respectability.'

Returning to the correspondence with William Archer, two paragraphs should be quoted which reveal a characteristic more fundamental than all the 'task of happiness' philosophy.

'You believe in the extreme moment of the facts that humanity has acquired and is acquiring; I think them of moment, but

still of much less than those inherent or inherited brute principles and laws that sit upon us (in the character of conscience) as heavy as a shirt of mail, and that (in the character of the affections and the airy spirit of pleasure) make all the light of our lives. The house is, indeed, a great thing, and should be rearranged on sanitary principles; but my heart and all my interest are with the dweller, that ancient of days and day-old infant man.

'And here we come to the division: not only do I believe that literature should give joy, but I see a universe, I suppose, eternally different from yours; a solemn, a terrible, but a very joyous and noble universe, where suffering is not the least wantonly inflicted, though it falls with dispassionate partiality, but where it may be and generally is nobly borne; where, above all (this I believe; probably you don't: I think he may, with cancer), *any brave man may make out a life which shall be happy for himself, and, by so doing, beneficent to those about him.* And if he fails, why should I hear him weeping? I mean, if I fail, why should I weep? Why should *you* hear *me*? Then to me morals, the conscience, the affections, and the passions are, I will own frankly and sweepingly, so infinitely more important than the other parts of life, that I conceive men rather triflers who become immersed in the latter; and I will always think the man who keeps his lip stiff, and makes "a happy fire-side clime", and carried a pleasant face about to friends and neighbours, infinitely greater (in the abstract) than an atrabilious Shakespeare or a backbiting Kant or Darwin. No offence to any of these gentlemen, two of whom probably (one for certain) came up to my standard.'

It does not seem to have occurred to him that, though philosophers and scientists might conceivably backbite, an atrabilious Shakespeare would be an impossibility. However, the whole point of the second quotation lies in 'I see a universe . . . where *any brave man may make out a life which shall be happy for himself, and, by so doing, beneficent to those about him*'. There we have a more sober statement of the *Celestial Surgeon* doctrine and a summary, once for all, of his own life's achievement.

What is of the highest importance in these passages and must be kept in mind when we consider the relation of Stevenson and his writings to a generation that is sick with science and incredulous of 'the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination', is his strong aversion from the intrusion of sociology into art and his passionate belief in the instinctive as against the rational element in the soul. A Scotsman reasons not from lack of feeling but because his feelings are strong and demand exercise and satisfaction.

Again, a literature which becomes too sociological creates types rather than character, and to do this would be to run counter to the Presbyterian sense of the importance of the individual. The same applies to the literature which tells a tale by sprinkling a few names of persons and places over the notes for a psychological text-book. Two of the finest plays which have been written this century have come from Scotland: *Dear Brutus* and *A Sleeping Clergyman*. Each of these could have been merely a play written round a theory; but the desperate moral earnestness of their race led the one author to bombard us with fantasy, the other with acts of violence, neither method for a moment detracting from the ethical force which made the plays great. I am sure Stevenson would have delighted in both, but I am not so sure of his reception of the usual Shaw or Galsworthy play, the one with its strict packing of some rather queer flowers of fancy into a box of theory which is the wrong size, the other with its tender, pitiful placing in a costly vase of a few choice flowers cut off from their parent stem. He would have preferred the method which faces the flower in its native environment and is studious to discover, within its natural and flowery limits, the inexorable working-out of providence or biology.

And then sociological literature has a trick of turning

into the literature of rebellion, and in our youth we all were thrilled to read, in Gilbert Murray's preface to the *Trojan Women*, that the rebel among the passions was pity; and pity finds an unusually bleak home in a Calvinist country. Do not imagine that you will ever enlist many Scotsmen in the fight for the under-dog. The case for the law-breaker, the murderer, the slave, the oppressed in general, you will plead to him almost in vain. 'The doer must suffer.' Where individuals are concerned, he may display, as Stevenson himself most memorably displayed, a real generosity in help; but against collective social action that shall abolish the wrong, he sets his face.

The obvious example of this is his concern, in 1887, to transport his household to Ireland and take up residence on a farm whose owner had been shot by extremists and whose womenfolk were left in peril. What he saw as the cowardice of the authorities outraged him, and he suffered as he had suffered over the death of Gordon, while admitting frankly how much 'excitement' the plan would involve, and that excitement was the proper reward of doing anything right and a little dangerous. (Let moral critics of that read through the second volume of the letters, at the end of which the scheme is mentioned, and ask themselves how they could have borne seven years of that kind of health; or go to the Keats House at Hampstead and stand in the room where Brown heard his friend say 'with a sudden calmness', 'I cannot be deceived in the colour of that blood, it is arterial blood, that drop is my death-warrant; I must die.')

But for all the high-hearted idealism which he undoubtedly displayed over this project, he was too thoroughly Scottish to have believed that such conduct, however right for the individual, could be right or wise for the state, and in the epistle which dedicated *The*

*Dynamiter* to the police officers who had been foremost in suppressing outrages, he speaks completely in the national character when he would have it borne in mind that 'man is but a devil weakly fettered by some generous beliefs and impositions, and for no word however nobly sounding, and no cause however just and pious, to relax the stricture of these bonds'.

Somehow, Calvin has sapped in his followers the power, even the desire which is so much of the power, to be in the right with two or three. 'Haven't you noticed,' asked the man in Galsworthy's play, 'whenever one of these Umanitarians writes to the papers there's always a Scotchman after him next morning?'

Another passage which seems akin to those last quoted occurs in a letter to Mrs. Fairchild written in 1892, and although the reader is hampered by not knowing exactly what aspect of the 'New Youth' his correspondent had touched on, it has always seemed to me (perhaps from its rather unenthusiastic reference to Ibsen) to be equally significant of his essential mistrust of literature with a purpose—a very different thing from moralizing through art, as he did himself.

'Well, I love the romantic solemnity of youth; and even in this form, although not without laughter, I have to love it still. They are such ducks! But what are they made of? We were just as solemn as that about atheism and the stars and humanity; but we were all for belief anyway—we held atheism and sociology (of which none of us, nor indeed anybody, knew anything) for a gospel and an iron rule of life; and it was lucky enough, or there would have been more windows broken.

'And so, when you see all these little Ibsens, who seem at once so dry and so excitable, and faint in swathes over a play (I suppose—for a wager) that would seem to me merely tedious, smile behind your hand, and remember the little dears are all in a blue funk. It must be very funny, and to a spectator

like yourself I almost envy it. But never get desperate; human nature is human nature; and the Roman Empire, since the Romans founded it and made our European nature what it is, bids fair to go on and to be true to itself. These little bodies will all grow up and become men and women, and have heaps of fun; nay, and are having it now; and whatever happens to the fashion of the age, it makes no difference—there are always high and brave and amusing lives to be lived; and a change of key, however exotic, does not exclude melody.’

These sentiments have often, I confess, made me angry. I have thought of all the earnest young people I know who attend week-end conferences where they pass resolutions, and call upon governments to disarm, and deplore the unjust distribution of privilege, and I have wondered how better my hero wished them to pass their time, since he so thoroughly earned, in his own youth, the reputation of atheist and revolutionary. But, of course, a public house in Advocates Close is a more picturesque setting for the birth of social reform than some well-polished and tastefully decorated conference house. But in the end I calm down. I acknowledge that proportion is all, and that some are driven by the law of their nature to spend their week-ends in conferences, while others may prefer to see *Hamlet* or read the *Ode to a Nightingale* without attempting to make a pacifist tract of one or a protest against some Wild Birds Act of the other. What, I think, would have irritated Stevenson was that you should imagine for a moment that you used the same emotional apparatus for both Saturday employments; or, in the long run, that you should think you could presume to let the intelligence dictate at all to the emotions. I suspect, however, that my own judgement on this interesting passage suffers because I find so intensely revolting the cliché ‘high and brave and amusing lives’, which is wretchedly unworthy of the man who wrote *Weir*.

We know that both Meredith and Henry James, in *The Amazing Marriage* and *The Author of Beltraffio*, drew characters based on what they knew of Stevenson. Gower Woodseer, in the former novel, is not a particularly attractive person, but it would have taken a warmer spirit than Meredith's, and a less distorted style, to convey the elusive personality here expressed in the character of a young man who loves vagabondage and attempts to make experience square with his philosophy of 'not caring for his life a fraction more than Destiny does'. He possessed a simple candour which led him to be open with all, he gave forth precocious flashes of wisdom, alternating with a broad playfulness that touched on effrontery. In a tiresome notebook he perpetually scribbled sentences in a style which swung between the picturesque and the sententious.

The result of all this is a composite photograph which any intelligent admirer could have made up from Stevenson's own writings and the records of his friends. Here there is little charm, and the only bit of description which strikes the reader as having much real perception about it is the phrase 'An impressionable fellow among his fellows, a philosopher only in his courted solitudes'.

The figure of Mark Ambient in *The Author of Beltraffio*, if it is drawn from Stevenson, is drawn from a later Stevenson, the recognized successful writer of the middle of the '80's. It is a pleasing portrait of a man 'organized for literature', who looks at all things from the standpoint of the artist, 'to whom every manifestation of human energy was a thrilling spectacle, who felt for ever the desire to resolve his experience of life into a literary form'. Ambient had the faculty of making 'the fanciful real and the real fanciful'. He held that the use of 'the second best word' was the highest of social offences, so carefully and affectionately does James include in a charming portrait

the more exasperating traits of the stylist. Nor does he forget even the apparent combination, in the face, of anxiety and indifference, or the 'conscious, expressive eyes—the eyes of a foreigner . . . much more than of the usual Englishman'. (The story is put into the mouth of an American. Nationalists, forward!) It is all convincing, but to the reader who knows his Stevenson, it receives a kind of sorrowful glory just because it suggests a personality and environment (an environment not only of certificated success but of difference from a wife whose ideal of art is not the ideal of something coextensive with life) which do not follow too harmoniously from what youth had promised. Somehow we feel that this is not the development we would have expected from the boy of seventeen who spent the evenings in his lodgings at Anstruther, after a half-hearted day of watching harbour construction, in pouring out long screeds of serious romance and drama based on Covenanting annals. It hardly seems to follow, either, from the boy of a few years later, roaming about the least eligible haunts of Edinburgh and cherishing within his solitary being his strange other self.

By far the finest account which any friend wrote of Stevenson is that by Henry James in *Notes on Novelists*. It expresses so admirably what every reader who cares must have felt that to write additional appreciations seems superfluous. Where the rest of the biographers and editors and critics have been content with mere description seasoned with panegyric, James has analysed and has gone far towards reducing the famous 'charm' to its basic ingredients. For after all, if a man can so attract those who never looked into his eyes or heard his conversation (and we know that usually the mere account of another's conversational powers irritates us and makes us decide to avoid every opportunity of meeting such an impossible person), there must be more



than that, something existing for any one to grasp who can only know the man in print. There must be some quality and combination of circumstances such as never fails to excite another human heart. James, keenly observing, enjoying his observations, level-headed, setting it all down as if it were some ordinary matter and yet moved all the time by honest enthusiasm, compressed into one rather gigantic sentence in his essay the various external forces which helped to shape the man.

‘With friction and tension playing their part, with the filial relation quite classically troubled, with breaks of tradition and lapses from faith, with restless excursions and sombre returns, with the love of life at large mixed in his heart with every sort of local piety and passion and the unjustified artist fermenting on top of all in the recusant engineer, he was as well started as possible toward the character he was to keep.’

There, in less than a hundred words, is a masterpiece in compression, a portrait which tells us far more than Sidney Colvin’s introduction to the letters, for that merely keeps us reading on and on in a not particularly wise passiveness, while almost every word that James wrote, apart from prepositions and articles, is a point carefully chosen from which the reader may actively begin his own exploration of memory and feeling, test his own powers of observation, and joyfully see the results confirmed by so fine a critic. ‘The filial relation’—‘classically’—‘restless excursions and sombre returns’—‘local piety and passion’—‘unjustified artist’—‘recusant engineer’—from each of these phrases we can set out to collect passage after passage from the books and letters. Each is a biography in little. We learn how to build. It is not enough to imagine we become unusually aware of some element in Stevenson at some moment when we see a lighthouse, or hear a Psalm sung in a Presbyterian church, or pass through some district where he once

travelled, or read some book that was one of his favourites. These are significant stimuli but they are on the surface. There is need of a world of thought. We must dig before we can build, dig deep into that old racial life which always fascinated Stevenson, a true Scot in his abiding sense of the past. As he wrote in *Olalla*:

‘Others, ages dead, have wooed other men with my eyes; other men have heard the pleading of the same voice that now sounds in your ears. The hands of the dead are in my bosom; they move me, they pluck me, they guide me. I am a puppet at their command; and I but re-inform features and attributes that have long been laid aside from evil in the quiet of the grave. . . . The race exists; it is old, it is ever young, it carried its eternal destiny in its bosom; upon it, like waves upon the sea, individual succeeds individual, mocked with a semblance of self-control, but they are nothing.’

No one giving serious thought to the deep implications of those phrases of James could ever dismiss Stevenson as the flimsy *poseur* of some legends. He will be the more inclined to wonder at the positive and solid factors which that undoubtedly picturesque descent and origin contributed, and at the manner in which the other picturesque elements afforded by his travels only served to rivet together into an integrity the various portions of the life’s foundations. It may, for example, be ‘picturesque’ to die and be buried in a Pacific island, although to a Scot the enduring heart-hunger of so far an exile makes the epithet ironic; but it is only the end of a string of ‘ifs’. If he had been a strong man, he would not have been there; and if he had not been a stickit engineer, he could not have been reminded, when he heard a bombardment in Samoa, of the days when as a boy he was on Eilean Earraid, and lay in the heather with his face hidden because he could feel, in his nerves, the shots which were killing men in the Franco-Prussian war. And so on.

No other friend and critic has done Stevenson such good service as James did in writing what forces the reader to sort out the rational grounds for his own pleasure. He has other happy expressions which pack into a few words all the paradoxical and enigmatic qualities of the man, as when he calls him 'a drenched yachtsman haunted with style' and 'a shameless Bohemian haunted with duty'; till finally, in a perfect gust of weighty enthusiasm, he asks whether Stevenson was not perhaps wiser on life than on art. And here we may be sure we are not dealing with a critic who would lose his head over petty optimisms. It is more solid merits of which he was thinking when he ascribed to his friend 'a soundness as to questions of the vital connexion, a soundness all liberal and easy and born of the manly experience, that it is a luxury to touch'.

There we see delineated the man we want to contemplate, the qualities without which Stevenson might have been not even the merely entertaining conversationalist of the Colvin portrait, but a man quite at the mercy of his own nervous excitability and incapable of making any real contribution to his world, a rather exquisite buffoon. James gives us the man whose letters are so free from cloudy aesthetics and transcendental aspirations, but so full of shrewdness and that entertaining gaiety (when gay) which does not mark the letters of all great writers.

From far, from eve and morning,  
And yon twelve-winded sky,  
The stuff of life to knit me  
Blew hither—here am I.

Speak now and I shall answer,  
How shall I greet you, say,  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way?

There are certain writers who make us feel like that; and

there are other writers, including many very great ones, who do not. Their gifts may be very great, their genius may be unquestioned, but this particular power of communicating to others, as distinct from declaring or teaching to others, how mysterious existence is, has not been given to them. The spirit that lives precariously within our several envelopes of flesh and nerves and bones, we must all wonder at; the miracles of the unresting heart and the eloquent brain, now dictating to, now obeying the passions, tease us out of thought when we pause to consider them, and if the artist does not make our tenancy of this mortal body wonderful to us, to whom shall we turn? But even in a poet the envelope may be so thick and tough, all obstructed with seals and registration labels to keep the dedicated spirit safe, as it was with Wordsworth, that he altogether lacks this charm—and I believe a great part of that quality, whether we are dealing with Stevenson's or not, lies in this very power of making the reader feel that the life of the spirit in the body is mysterious. (And even if Wordsworth had possessed charm, it could not have survived the perpetual companionship of Dorothy, that most tiresome of all women connected with great writers; unless it had helped him to suppress her.)

To take another poet whom I deeply admire, there is Arnold. I wish he made me more conscious than he does of his own mystery, and my own, and the world's. I always feel guilty because this sense of intimacy and mysteriousness never, or very slowly, comes to me when I read his poems. It is just possible I might feel able to say, somewhere round by Bablock-hythe or Ferry Hinksey, 'The air is bright with thy past presence yet'; but I am not at all certain. I can picture him there, with Arthur Clough beside him looking pale and miserable about the Thirty-nine Articles, but it is a picture drawn by reason not

passion, and probably drawn as much because people who worry about the Thirty-nine Articles are always interesting as because Arnold had that rare power of really coming into communication with his admirers. So I have to leave him among his very Oxford and Victorian Alpine snows, waiting for that 'mighty wave of thought and joy' which has not yet lifted us up. Nor do I feel much more successful over Morris, another hero, for I have sat in the garden of his boyhood's home and been unconscious of him. On the other hand, deficient as I am in imagination, while writing these disconnected impressions I have sometimes felt that I could scarcely take up the task from yesterday, or have broken off in the middle of a paragraph, so alive seemed the man. He is in the house, I would rave, he may walk into the room and discover my intrusion. Thus do his laughter and his despair survive to challenge whatever images of death come to us, waking in the night. And many an artist who is credited with greater profundity of thought and more of the 'dedicated spirit' disposition cannot claim that power; for example, Coleridge or Tolstoy.

No doubt a little more imaginative industry on my part would bring that thrilling sense of the spirit that lives, but such effects come primarily from the artist and not from the most painstaking devotee. Receptiveness is one thing, and is a question of with how much preparation we live; but deliberate industry is another. Great writing does not pause to argue or even to persuade us into receiving what it can give. It has no ceremonious preliminaries. That is why, to turn to happier examples of writers who mean a great deal to me and never fail to stir that sense, not only of the mystery of their own inspired secret but of the whole of life itself, I am conscious when I read *The Dunciad* of Pope present in no meanly egoistic way; for Pope was undeniably a greater poet than Arnold, a man of far finer

sensibility and imagination. Similarly Stevenson 'comes alive' to me as Morris rarely does, for Stevenson is a finer writer, less troubled with fluency and more alive to tragedy. But I own I am puzzled when I find how far away Wordsworth remains, and how near Keats is ever willing to be, for there I am loath to make distinctions. It must be a problem for ever. Why did Wordsworth somehow have the wrong inside, emotions that seem so ill matched with perceptions? Yet we know that it cost him real nervous malaise to write a poem, and he can surprise us with such a confession as:

Nor is it I who play the part  
But a shy spirit in the heart  
That comes and goes, will sometimes leap  
From hiding-places ten years deep  
To haunt me with familiar face,  
Returning like a ghost unlaid  
Until the debt I owe be paid.

There seems no solution. I own that I appear to have selected three writers who were all, for the most part of their lives, invalids. What cannot be denied is that somehow writers in the one group immediately and inexorably overwhelm us by making us feel that the barriers of the flesh count for very little and that a new kingdom of the spirit can be entered here and now; while the other group may lead us ultimately to that stage, but only after an interval of reflection, not to say calculation. The difference in our ways of responding is the difference between offering one's life to an ideal of nationalism in self-sacrifice, and paying income-tax. This may or may not be the secret behind legends of 'charm', but it seems to be some rough definition of genius, and it is more than the idea that this would be a rather unusual and romantic type of man to have for a friend which makes readers, yes and earnest

critics too, admit the personal attraction of Stevenson. Without affection there is no vision, and there is nothing to be said, in the name of reason, for the theory that merely because a writer inspires affection, his art must be technically worthless. Doubtless many of Stevenson's admirers are not admiring his greatest work at all when they voice their enthusiasm, and what they see is something very different from what the critic sees. They have not critical minds and they prefer to forget the first words of the inscription on the Edinburgh memorial, 'a master of English and Scottish letters', so intent are they on the statement following, that his name has been endeared to readers by 'constancy under infirmity and sufferings', and his spirit of 'mirth, courage and love'. But even when they are of the most sentimental, they are admiring fine things, and the uncritical reader is less likely than is the intellectual to admire twaddle, or to say that he admires it because of anything unusual in the writer's personality.

As the passage by Andrew Lang prefaced to this chapter suggests, his work does somehow have the effect of raising the reader's critical standards and helping him to participate in creation; and then, as Lang points out in the same essay, there was never a less 'cultured' writer. Stevenson is simply soaked in unbookishness. At best he achieves a random culture stowed away almost untidily in odd places of the house of life. He is probably the least educated of all our novelists, and while many a mediocre writer may have buttressed his reputation with the aid of a half-remembered Horace and old, unhappy, far-off Greek Proses from Sidgwick, we are positively amazed to find Stevenson venturing on an *amari aliquid* or *Vixere fortes*. From his example, there certainly is something to be said for not reading the Sixth Aeneid before the age of thirty-five.

You will turn in vain to Stevenson for any explanation

of 'tendencies' in the literature of the eighties. There is one interesting passage in the letters whose opening words can only make us wonder how the art of to-day would have impressed him.

'We live in a rum age of music without airs, stories without incident, pictures without beauty, American wood engravings that should have been etchings, and dry-point etchings that ought to have been mezzo-tints. I think of giving 'em literature without words; and I believe if you were to try invisible illustration, it would enjoy a considerable vogue. So long as an artist is on his head, is painting with a flute, or writes with an etcher's needle, or conducts the orchestra with a meat-axe, all is well; and plaudits shower along with roses. But any plain man who tries to follow the obtrusive canons of his art, is but a commonplace figure.'

I am sure that the critics have not given much thought to the solitariness which Stevenson had to endure. I am not thinking of the essential solitariness of the artist with his 'mystic heaven and earth within'.

'An art is a fine fortune, a palace in a park, a band of music, health, and physical beauty; all but love—to any worthy practiser. I sleep upon my art for a pillow; I waken in my art; I am unready for death, because I hate to leave it. I love my wife, I do not know how much, nor can, nor shall, unless I lost her; but while I can conceive my being widowed, I refuse the offering of life without any art. I *am* not but in my art; it is me; I am the body of it merely.'

Rather an over-excited passage, doubtless, and perhaps we would rather it had not been revealed to us, but the intensity of it helps to explain that 'callousness' which some critics of his personality have pounced on as forming so great a contrast to the affection called forth in his friends. Love, they say, he certainly received, and he gave good companionship in return because his sympathy was quick and his nervous excitability made superficial gaiety inevi-



table, but was it love that he gave back? 'A man may send you six sheets of letter-paper covered with the most entertaining gossip,' he wrote in *Virginibus*, 'or you may pass half-an-hour pleasantly, perhaps profitably, over an article of his; do you think the service would be greater, if he had made the manuscript in his heart's blood?' This was not merely youthful cynicism, it contains the instinctive economy of the artist, for if he writes all his letters with his heart's blood, there will never be a *Weir of Hermiston*; and some would say it spoke equally of the invalid who has learned that he dare not risk too great an emotional outlay for it will lead to nothing but exhaustion. And there is something also of this very 'callousness'. He certainly could write the six sheets of most entertaining gossip, and his letters are full of affection for Colvin, the mentor, for Baxter, the ally of his wild days, for others, and it is painful to read those written under the shock of James Walter Ferrier's death; but I believe the critics who read there also a touch of 'callousness', 'self-sufficiency' or what, even at twenty-three, he could recognize in himself as 'my impersonal way of liking people', are correct; and it is quite natural that they should be, for it sometimes seems to be forgotten that lack of brothers and sisters leaves its ineffaceable mark even on the spirit of an artist, rich in its own resources. The only child cannot learn the simple A B C of affection at the normal stage in life, and when he tries to master it later on, he may lose sight of it in steering between the extreme of utter aloofness and an indiscreetly outspoken regard for his friend. It is not surprising to hear that he never really understood children. It would have been more remarkable if he had. Nor was this due to that intensity of imagination which had made his own childish play so enthralling that he refused to believe that Henry James had never played at being a pirate. It was due to

solitude and nothing else. He was passionately fond of the small Russian child at Mentone, and it makes a touching picture; but she was a phenomenon to him. It may be granted that *A Child's Garden* is full of evidence of happiness with parents, with nurse, with numerous cousins; but it was always the home of a solitary child to which he returned from play with other children, and the solitude was too much accentuated in the 'wild and bitterly unhappy days' of youth, for apart from Bob Stevenson, he made no friend until he was twenty-one or so, and the lonely years during which he struggled with apprentice engineering were a bad preparation for the difficulties with his father in which they culminated.

It was at the age of seventeen that he wrote to his cousin:

'What an egotistical brute I am! Self! Self! Self! What is the tune, the burthen, the fable, the moral, self! self! Well, you must take me as you find me. I have no confidant, and solemnly, with the exception of my father, to whom such matters would be subject for scolding, no *friend* to whom I can speak. . . . My daily life is one repression from beginning to end, and my letters to you are the safety valve. You don't know how few of them you get.'

There are also the well-known sentences in a letter written a few years later which pray for health and a competence, and '*O du lieber Gott*, friends'.

Turn to our infallible guide, Archie Weir, and we read:

'Innes replied, with his usual flippancy and more than his usual insight, "I know Weir, but I never met Archie". No one had met Archie, a malady most incident to only sons. He flew his private signal, and none heeded it; it seemed he was abroad in a world from which the very hope of intimacy was banished; and he looked round about him on the concourse of his fellow-students, and forward to the trivial days and acquaintances that were to come, without hope or interest.'

For lack of a diffused reciprocity of emotions, the parents

of the only child, ignorant themselves of all but a tiny secluded corner of parenthood, sometimes see things in quite wrong proportions. Everything is underlined; nothing is deliberately or accidentally minimized, while they hang entranced over their one precious title to the name of father or mother, their one experiment that is never lit or shadowed by the interplay of other claimants to affection; and the child, the experiment, for its part, conscious of needs which they cannot supply, can scarcely hope to be very simple or spontaneous while this endless scrutiny goes on and childish emotions are strained by being always matched against those of adults. 'I think I never feel so lonely as when I am too much with my father and mother, and I am ashamed of the feeling, and that makes it worse,' Stevenson wrote even at the age of twenty-eight, when starting on an unwilling trip to Shandon. Several years earlier he had written, 'I have discovered why I get on always so ill, am always so nasty, so much worse than myself, with my parents; it is because they always take me at my worst, seek out my faults, and never give me any credit . . . I am always bad with them because they always seem to expect me to be not very good . . . they never seem to see when I am good.'

One has to be sorry for the father and mother. He was all they had and he had survived all the dangerous illnesses of childhood only, it appeared, to break their hearts with his 'atheism' and rebellion, his fits of gloom inherited from his father, the scandal he caused in scandal-loving Edinburgh, and that apparent callous levity which they particularly deplored in him. No one can envy them their feelings when the doctors announced in 1873 that he must be sent off to the Riviera, and alone, because his home was too dangerous. His return to Heriot Row must have been an occasion of miserable self-consciousness for the whole

three of them, with undivided emotions, which the presence of even one brother or sister would have helpfully split up and diverted, pressing too heavily on three personalities not one of which was entirely tranquil or placid.

So there he was, unprepared for human relationships, longing for them and yet able to exist on his own resources, strangely endowed with that indefinable attraction and yet missing the flat brightness of the merely popular person; and his friendships were lasting. It was Stevenson the married man whose friendship with Henley came to disaster, not Stevenson the friend.

Nevertheless, the only child, even when he carries with him through life enough imagination and magnetism for a dozen other men, must for ever experience ordinary relationships and even chance encounters as things quite different from the relationships and encounters of one belonging to a family. Their vision will never be his. His very detachment ought to save him from many blunders, but to the end it will rob him of something and it may leave him perpetually vulnerable. There is pathos in Stevenson's description of his wife: 'She is everything to me; wife, brother, sister, daughter and dear companion.' This clan system hardly seems to accord with Henley's 'much Antony', though it escapes the fatal decency of

Thy elder brother I would be,  
Thy father, anything to thee.

Perhaps, he thought, this married feeling is like friendship, an extension of those ties I have missed. But he was honest; he knew that Baxter and Colvin were not really like brothers. What were wives and what were sisters? Damn it, let's get on with David and Alan.

Doubtless he thought he really meant what he had written about his wife, but he was an artist, he possessed his own world, and he could not permanently view human

relationship with the high gravity and sententiousness of those who know no other form of self-expression. Wandering passions, accesses of fear, desire for sympathy, preoccupation with technique which might defeat but was more dependable than a woman; these ardours he recognized and these he wanted. Antony was a spare-time role, the pleasure of an hour paid for with bitterness. 'A cloying treacle to the wings of independence'; most of the time he would have echoed Keats on the love of woman.

Where relationships with women were concerned, he seems never to have seen clearly. The result of living in a Puritan country, says one critic, and perhaps that, in conjunction, let it never be forgotten, with the life of an only child, will explain most of the trouble. It is touching and pretty to address one's devoted nurse as 'my second mother', but to continue 'my first wife' is only an anti-climax.

Stevenson suffered a great deal from loneliness. An artist, he had to be alone. He knew the isolation described by Arnold.

Or if not quite alone, yet they  
Which touch thee are unmating things,  
Ocean and clouds and night and day,  
Lorn autumns and triumphant springs,  
And life, and others' joy and pain,  
And loves, if love, of happier men.

But loneliness was thrust upon him in childhood, and later on, illness brought more of it; not the rich loneliness of the creative worker, but isolation, tiresome and wearying. When he was well, he had to work and enjoy the sociability forbidden for weeks at a time; when he was fit there was no time to be alone, when he was alone, he was not fit. Only in the five or six years between the lonely unhappiness of the early seventies and his marriage did he

ever succeed in being both fit and alone; at Barbizon, for example. Without that short time of freedom, it would have gone badly with his art. In those days he took his art very soberly and wanted to live adventurously; but after marriage, health ruined, he was forced to live soberly and seek his adventure in writing.

That picture of Stevenson which is, or was, set before our eyes when we were young is at once ironic and true. From the early travel books and such an essay as *Walking Tours*, we collect the materials for the picture of a dream; such a wind on the for ever unblasted heath, such a singing of birds and chattering of rivers and twinkling of stars, such hope, such faith, such a world in which to be young. No Scotch whisky, no east wind, no dogma, no doubt, no boy at Mentone half-dead from nervous exhaustion, ordered away from his home and writing *Ordered South*; nothing comes to us but the note of the gauger's flute playing 'Over the hills and far away', as it plays in that poem of travel whose unaffected simplicity endears it to all readers. As years pass and one reads more and learns more, all this beloved vagabondage seems unbearably pathetic. One remembers a poignant phrase used by C. E. Montague, when he speaks of those who were killed who were not mere boys but had had just a year or two before 1914 in which to explore Europe, her art and her mountains—'the red covers of their Murrays and their Baedekers are faded, like Ophelia's violets that withered all when her father died'.

In *Travels with a Donkey* and *An Inland Voyage* a voice speaks from another civilization, which could hardly be understood by the young men who now shoot across continents and write accounts of them with snappy titles and some emphasis on sex and sanitation. In essential seriousness, Stevenson would have more in common with

Mr. Huxley circumnavigating the world with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at his elbow, dejectedly contemplating the human ant as it hurries past the beauty of ages, and registering his disillusionment with an antiseptic pen. For the *Encyclopaedia* is only a symptom, and Mr. Huxley's conscience is as vigilant as Stevenson's, his perception of beauty as sensitive, his hatred of insincerity as deep. They could meet and understand one another.

Mr. Swinnerton, in a remark which is deficient in both kindness and intelligence, declares that Stevenson's delicate health rendered him 'intellectually timid and spiritually cautious'. Clearly, as he proves elsewhere in his study of Stevenson, he is one of the many literary people who would be the better for more acquaintance with the poems. I can only suppose that he has some reason for believing that Stevenson refused a dialectic combat with Jowett or was unwilling, under strong pressure from Mrs. Humphrey Ward, to declare himself an agnostic. Or perhaps it is a kind of back-handed compliment to Scotsmen, to complain that one of their greatest writers does not exhibit certain qualities associated with the race. Another critic has complained that he 'stops on the threshold'; in fact, that he did not write *Lear*. Certainly the question of health does come in here. Again and again Stevenson looked deep into the blackness of the human soul and he looked without shrinking, but to write unshrinkingly of what he saw there, was a task beyond his nervous powers. He wrote *Jekyll and Hyde*, he wrote (or largely infused his power into) *The Ebb-Tide*, he wrote *The Master of Ballantrae*; among short stories he wrote *Olalla*, *The Pavilion on the Links*, *The Merry Men*, and *Markheim*. A pretty good collection of gloomy pieces, and, as always, *Weir* stands out in the background on its own higher level and offers us true tragedy because it is not gloomy but lightens the

heart that pities and forgives. 'I do not think', he wrote, 'it is a wholesome part of me that broods on the evil in the world and man; but I do not think that I get harm from it; possibly my readers may, which is more serious.' He might as well have apologized for his nationality and been done with it. Evil he may have brooded on, but never ugliness, which he dismissed as 'the prose of horror'. Could he see the Scottish novels of to-day, he would revolt at the work of Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. (I suppose I am unfair to Mr. Gunn. I have tried hard to see in his dreary stories that which I would like to believe to be Celtic, and I see nothing but talent misused. He wrote nobly of the Highland clearances, but has lost himself in the gloom standardized by Central European fiction.) *Weir* is simply in the Euripidean tradition and they are not; though I suppose Stevenson knew as little about Euripides as he knew about all the other cultural commonplaces of the average successful writer.

The *Vailima Prayers* are usually spoken of with a rather affectionate regret, as things written to please his mother's conventional devoutness, or with some exasperation as fresh evidence of Stevenson's tendency to pose. Neither point of view seems to me quite correct. Doubtless, having established himself as laird and father of a household, he wished to play the part with every care for a ritual which Samoan habit considered indispensable; and there was also in evidence a touch of that half-unrealized hypocrisy which always sustains the Scot. He has himself reminded us that Burns, returning home from a difficult interview with the parents of Jean Armour, might sing his favourite 'How are Thy servants blest, O Lord'; an unpleasant picture, indeed an indictment against a whole nation, and yet perfectly comprehensible when a narrow faith has, as we now say, canalized all the emotions. As Stevenson grew



older, as he who had lived so long under sentence of death began to suffer more in mind than in body from the strain of domestic responsibility and expense and care for the future, innate qualities rose from their sleep and laid hands on him in moments of darkness:

Jehovah hear thee in the day  
When trouble He doth send.

The past was asserting itself in this theology no less than in his art. He was very weary, and God, even the severest God, gave rest. The *Prayers* contain a great deal about morning faces and laughter, but fortunately they contain better things.

‘Thou of the vast designs, in which we blindly labour, suffer us to be so far constant to ourselves and our beloved.’

They are full of penitential phrases that cover no one knows what grim memories known only to himself.

‘Help us to look back . . . on the pit and the miry clay, the blackness of despair, the horror of misconduct, from which our feet have been plucked out.’

That a whole prayer ‘For Self-blame’ was written is no surprise.

‘Let us feel our offences with our hands, make them great and bright before us like the sun, make us eat them and drink them for our diet. . . . Let all here before Thee carry and measure with the false balances of love, and be in their own eyes and in all conjunctures the most guilty.’

In the long run, I believe the gloom in the *Prayers* outweighs the alleged optimism. Mortals are here usually spoken of as those who ‘contend in disappointment with their frailties’, who struggle with ‘broken purposes of good, idle endeavours against evil’, whose efforts are vain, whose secret thoughts are unworthy. ‘Ease and confidence’, it has been well said, ‘are the last elements in the Scottish make-up’, and it was surely a strange failure to recognize this which led the late John Freeman to write,

'Simplicity shines in the large round moon of Stevenson's moral.'

It is a fine flow of Presbyterian gloom, expressed in beautiful cadences, and it represents an integral part of the man and a development (or, more correctly, a reassertion in maturer form of what had never been absent) to which we owe more than we shall ever know of that rebirth of the artist which made *Weir* possible. But it is exasperating to see phrases from the *Prayers* quoted with unction as representative of a sunny and childlike gaiety, when every one knows they were the work of a tired man cut off by half the world from understanding and sympathetic friends, master of a household which he should never have had to support, mistrustful of the continuance of his own creative ability, and with his heart crying:

Weep not the dead, for they have sleep  
Who lie at home, but ah, for me,  
In the deep grave my heart will weep  
With longing for my lost countrie.

So we continue to praise for his sense of style the man whose sense of sin was a hundred times more important.

It is better always to remember that that irritating couplet—irritating, that is, when quoted smugly by persons who cannot or will not hear the sardonic voice of the Scot in it—

The world is so full of a number of things,  
I am sure we should all be as happy as kings,  
replaced one which conveyed a somewhat different moral:  
The world is so great and I am so small,  
I do not like it at all, at all.

Nor does it take long to see which represents more genuinely a child who is lonely although surrounded by love and solicitude, whose health is a perpetual concern of first importance, whose feverish nights are troubled by dreams of the hell of John Calvin. Considering the com-

pletely prosaic vision of childhood represented by *A Child's Garden* and its complete lack of that higher form of fantasy which his other poems can display, we may discount Mr. Chesterton's theory that Stevenson suffered so much from plunging into a Bohemianism which was all the more repulsive because it existed in a Puritan city, that he returned for refreshment and peace to the world of childhood. There are no bright shoots of everlastingness in the Stevensonian childhood, no rustle of the wings of angels departing. You might as well expect a good Christmas carol from a Scotsman as any mystical vision of childhood, for to him it is merely the youth of sin, with more in it to be eradicated than to be encouraged.

Perhaps it is from reflections on his childhood that we may pass most naturally to reflections on his nationality, for it was in childhood that he absorbed the Presbyterianism which he never lost. For he was never the 'highly honourable, responsible, and chivalrous pagan' of Mr. Chesterton's invention, unless a pagan of a particularly institutional turn of mind is some type of Presbyterian. The Scot is as fierce and eager in disbelieving as in believing, attaining a power of negation which England knew only in the greater Victorian agnostics, but he makes an unsatisfactory pagan, for atavistic forces are far too strong in him, and he professes more often, as did Stevenson, a Presbyterianism grown colder than even its normal temperature than a true paganism. As I have already said, although my forbears were Presbyterian, I am not, but if I hear the metrical psalms referred to as 'doggerel', there is trouble, and I cannot escape from the strange force of their bald rhyming. Nor can one overlook the paraphrases, those mild but sombre pieces of eighteenth-century lyrical piety, which also have their part in shaping national thought and culture, lying hidden in the complex

personalities of most Scots and, when brought to light, forming the strongest of links. Edmund Gosse, in reviewing 'Cummy's' diary of travels abroad with the family, speaks of the 'pressure which was gently brought to bear on the moral life of this boy of genius', and his fellow-countrymen, at least, can easily estimate the weight which those solemn songs, sung rather dragglingly Sunday after Sunday, would have on an impressionable child. Far more surely than any of the beautiful English of the Prayer Book's gentlemanly religion, these undistinguished words, sung by such earnest worshippers, bridge the gulf between the ordinary man and the man of genius, between the ordinary boy and Louis Stevenson. I think of

Keep silence, all ye sons of men,  
And hear with reverence due;  
Eternal wisdom from above  
Thus lifts her voice to you,

or,

Come let us to the Lord our God  
With contrite hearts return,

and I recall the familiar tunes, *Coleshill* and *Kilmarnock* and the rest, some of bourgeois piety, others with a more Celtic strain, to which the whole of a country for ever unites them. And I feel that more than all his revolt took out of him was put into Stevenson through hearing such verses as:

O may Thy Spirit seal our souls,  
And mould them to Thy will,  
That our weak hearts no more may stray  
But seek Thy precepts still,  
That to perfection's sacred height  
We nearer still may rise,  
And all we think, and all we do,  
Be pleasing in Thine eyes.

If you wish to know how they were sung, listen when

next the Glasgow Orpheus Choir sets the waves of sentimentality rolling among the exiles in Queen's Hall with 'By cool Siloam's shady rill'; though of course they would sing differently in Edinburgh. There was in the air, while such words were sung, a blessed sense of security and of superiority to 'the vast world to whom Disruption Principles were as the chatter of tree-top apes', but there would be something nobler than security and superiority, for if religion has written some of the ugliest pages in Scots history, it could, and sometimes does, write some of the finest.

There is a downright grandeur in the psalms and paraphrases, an insistence on rightness of conduct and the faith of a nation, which makes them great and should accustom the Scot from childhood to a lofty picture of the moral ideal. The paths of wisdom, for example—'the man who shuns them dies'; an inexorable statement of greater force than half a dozen mediocre hymns can supply. Nor did such sentences go in at one ear and out at the other with the boy who had had 'Cummy' for nurse. But who shall draw any ordered plan of a religion which extends from the Catholicism of the Outer Isles and 'often comes the Christ in the stranger's guise', which we buy on Bloomsbury Christmas cards, to the novelist's hypocritical and sensual elder of the Kirk, sucking his peppermints as he sits under the novelist's hypocritical and sensual minister?

'Perfection's sacred height.' Something a child who cared for words might clothe with the romance that hung round the Castle Rock, whence the sound of bugles with 'unspeakable appeal' in their cadence seemed to cry yearningly to those below to come and find rest, 'warm hearts and bright fires'.

Or it might be a psalm, one with a more decorative tune than others, and interplay of men's and women's voices:

*The Man and the Scot*

O send Thy light forth and Thy truth;  
Let them be guides to me,  
And bring me to Thy holy hill,  
Even where Thy dwellings be.  
Then will I to God's altar go,  
To God, my chiefest joy . . .

Guidance by a light was something of a commonplace to a Stevenson, and a picture of that would be easy to make; but no one can tell exactly what splendours the altar would represent to a child who knew *The Arabian Nights* well but the story of the Covenanters perhaps better. Along with these more spectacular moments, we must remember the constant fearful treading of the narrow way watched over by 'Cummy', the avoidance of 'left-hand extremes and right-hand defections', and then the climax of revolt, due as much, no doubt, to youth's contempt for the inconsistency between the quest of perfection and the country's output of 'Pharisees and whisky' as to any rational abhorrence of dogma.

'The Kirkmen', wrote Keats on his Scottish tour, 'have done Scotland harm. They have banished puns, love and laughing.' Sixty years later, voyaging from a Scotland which was soon to face the Robertson Smith heresy trial, Stevenson wrote:

'One thing indeed is not to be learned in Scotland, and that is the way to be happy. . . . Can it be that the Puritan School, by divorcing a man from nature, by thinning out his instincts, and setting a stamp of its disapproval on whole fields of human activity and interest, leads at last directly to material greed?'

At the same time he could appreciate what good had come from the system, as in the account (September 1873) of meeting a labourer cleaning a byre.

'The man was to all appearance as heavy, as hébété, as any English clodhopper; but I knew I was in Scotland, and launched

out forthright into Education and Politics and the aims of one's life. I told him how I had found the peasantry in Suffolk, and added that their state had made me feel quite pained and down-hearted. "It but to do that", he said, "to onybody that thinks at a' . . . Him that has aye something ayont need never be weary." . . . I think the sentiment will keep, even through a change of words, something of the heartsome ring of encouragement that it had for me: that from a man cleaning a byre! You see what John Knox and his schools have done.

The whole passage is touched with that queer innocent priggishness which is so marked a feature of the early letters, the mark of a solitary child accustomed to overhearing and meditating on the talk of serious elders. Is there not a story of his sitting up in bed and shaking a finger at an uncle, bound for the General Assembly, while warning him in childish tones to 'beware of that man So-and-So', or words to that effect? Prelude to Bohemianism, indeed.

And if you are wise and looking for Scotland minus false glamour, turn to *The Silverado Squatters*.

'There is no special loveliness in that grey country, with the rainy, sea-beat archipelago; its fields of dark mountains; its unsightly places, black with coal; its treeless, sour, unfriendly-looking cornlands; its quaint, grey castle and city, where the bells clash of a Sunday, and the wind squalls, the salt showers fly and beat. . . . And although I think I would rather die elsewhere, yet in my heart of hearts, I long to be buried among good Scots clods. . . . The happiest lot on earth is to be born a Scotchman . . . you generally take to drink; your youth, as far as I can find out, is a time of louder war against society, of more outcry and tears and turmoil, than if you had been born, for instance, in England. But somehow life is warmer and closer; the hearth burns more redly . . . the very names, endeared in verse and music, cling nearer round our hearts.'

How true that is! They are names from the past, and Stevenson knew what he was talking about when he wrote,

not in any informative essay, but embedding the fact without any incongruity in the delicate fabric of *Weir*:

‘That is the mark of the Scot of all classes: that he stands in an attitude towards the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good or bad; and there lives alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation.’

In Scotland the past is always waiting round the corner for you. On fields where there was fighting or preaching, history lives as nowhere in England. Ghosts offer to fancy incidents innumerable, many ferocious, most courageous, few successful, few conceived in the Newbolt spirit. Anywhere you could scarcely be surprised to hear the voices of women ‘lilting at the yowe-milking’ and abruptly silenced by war. Sorry little country, perpetual battlefield, perpetual pulpit, perpetual gangway to the emigrant ship and booking-office for the London train; and yet we would not have her otherwise. ‘Clay of the pit whence we were wrought’, and so forth. (It is interesting, by the way, to note the words in *Olalla*: ‘Clay of the earth remembers its independent life and yearns to join us.’)

Even when he had escaped from Edinburgh to Mentone in that tragic winter of 1873, Stevenson had to write, ‘O sound of the wind among my own bleak hills! The snow and the cold, and the hard thin faces of steadfast serious people.’ And a few months after he returned home, we find him (the ‘horrible atheist’ of his parents’ fancy, as he had formerly styled himself) writing and publishing anonymously the *Appeal to the Clergy of the Church of Scotland*, a plea for generosity towards Free Church ministers who might now, thanks to legislation, feel able to return to the Establishment. Scottish affairs provided him with a world of his own, intimate and vehement, where no easy-going English friends could enter. He could not escape, he did



not wish to escape from the pressure of ancestral institutions, and if he could see his country now, every ounce of his quixotic impulsiveness would be ready for the service of her distress.

When a new disaster shakes the world, the Scot sees it in terms of old feuds, and his poet in war time says nothing modern when he watches the Camerons depart.

And every lad in his heart was dreaming  
Of honour and wealth to come,  
And honour and noble pride were calling  
To the tune of the pipes and drum;  
But I was hearing a woman singing  
On dark Dunvegan shore,  
'In battle or peace, with wealth or honour,  
MacCrimmon comes no more.'

And what could interpret more vividly the Celtic foreigner than Neil Munro's lament for Macleod of Raasay, killed at Loos and first of his race to be taken to burial without the tartan? (Compare this with such an English elegy as Maurice Baring's on Lord Lucas.)

Beside him, when he fell there in his beauty,  
Macleods of all the islands should have died;  
Brave hearts, his English! but they could not fathom  
To what old deeps the voice of Alan cried  
When in that strange French countryside, war-battered,  
Far from the creeks of home and hills of heath,  
A boy, he kept the old tryst of his people  
With the dark girl Death.

It is all so intensely personal; perhaps all too personal. Scotland's strength, Scotland's weakness, lies in this intense individualism combined with a wan glorying in the past. The Scottish novelist, for example, is little of an experimentalist, and is always at his best when he clings to native character and idiom. It is no use his trying to

write drama like a German or verse like a Czech, although it is equally absurd for him to despise verse written by his fellow countrymen in English and yet expressing the 'strong Scotch accent of the mind'. The Scot may write in English, but he can never write in the public school-pastoral key in which three-fourths of English poetry is pitched.

Every Scot who cares for Stevenson must particularly deplore those specifically Scottish works which figure in the long list of his projected writings and never saw the day. At Mentone in 1874, it was the plan for *Four Great Scotsmen* which came into his head: Knox, Hume, Burns, Scott.

'The Knox will really be new matter, as his life hitherto has been disgracefully written, and the events are romantic and rapid; the character very strong, salient, and worthy; much interest as to the future of Scotland, and as to that part of him which was truly modern under his Hebrew disguise. Hume, of course, the urbane, cheerful, gentlemanly, letter-writing eighteenth century, full of attraction, and much that I don't yet know as to his work. Burns, the sentimental side that there is in most Scotsmen, his poor troubled existence, how far his poems were his personally, and how far national, the question of the framework of society in Scotland, and its fatal effect upon the finest natures. Scott again, the ever delightful man, sane, courageous, admirable; the birth of Romance, in a dawn that was a sunset; snobbery, conservatism, the wrong thread in History, and notably in that of his own land.'

Then in the following year the scheme was changed and he decided on a long critical essay on Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns. 'Unless I deceive myself, I could even write it pretty adequately.' It is more than probable that he could, and Scotland would have been the richer. Fergusson certainly would have been interpreted with an unparalleled insight. Even towards the end of his life, the mere mention

of Fergusson's name could stir and awaken in Stevenson the something other than himself, the unknown quantity, which so often appeared to lie dormant while he strained over technical points with a pen that never insisted upon running away.

'I have said my last farewell to the hills and the heather and the lynns: like Leyden, I have gone into far lands to die, not stayed like Burns to mingle in the end with Scottish soil. I shall not even return like Scott for the last scene. Burns Exhibitions are all over. 'Tis a far cry to Lochow from tropical Vailima.

"But still our hearts are true, our hearts are Highland,  
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides."

'When your hand is in, will you remember our poor Edinburgh Robin? Burns alone has been just to his promise; follow Burns, he knew best, he knew whence he drew fire—from the poor, white-faced, drunken, vicious boy that raved himself to death in the Edinburgh madhouse. Surely there is more to be gleaned about Fergusson, and surely it is high time the task was set about. I may tell you (because your poet is not dead) something of how I feel: we are three Robins who have touched the Scots lyre this last century. Well, the one is the world's; he did it, he came off, he is for ever; but I and the other—ah! what bonds we have—born in the same city; both sickly, both pestered, one nearly to madness, one to the madhouse, with a damnatory creed; both seeing the stars and the dawn, and wearing shoe-leather on the same ancient stones, under the same pends, down the same closes, where our common ancestors clashed in their armour, rusty or bright.'

'You will never know, nor will any man, how deep this feeling is: I believe Fergusson lives in me. I do, but tell it not in Gath; every man has these fanciful superstitions, coming, going, but yet enduring; only most men are so wise (or the poet in them so dead) that they keep their follies for themselves.'

It is not always remembered that when he received 'with gratitude and wonder' the first proposals for the publication of the Edinburgh Edition, he wished he could have dedicated the whole array of it to the memory of

Fergusson, but, with his usual clear insight, condemned the idea as 'affectation' and dictated by a sentiment too abstruse for the general reader to understand.

The doctrines which Stevenson preached in *Lay Morals* are no longer particularly new or daring, though they may still sound comparatively revolutionary in Scotland, which has made so belated a start in admitting any connexion between Christianity and the obligation to do away with injustice and oppression. Not that he is primarily concerned with any social programme; it is individual conduct which he wishes to see reformed. His remarks on the necessity for a more literal application of New Testament precepts, for a higher doctrine of the stewardship of wealth, for less fear of public opinion and more emphasis on giving service than on making profit, are terribly familiar to us to-day. They are the props of a whole ideal structure of Christian sociology which Stevenson would have hated, for like all Scotsmen, even if he had not been an artist, he could not have joined successfully in presenting any organized and united front to a wrong. The conference and the questionnaire he would certainly have abhorred, even as he would have abhorred the light, bright, adaptable religion of works without faith. He was young in the days before

Suave politeness, tempering bigot zeal,  
Corrected 'I believe' to 'One does feel',

and to the end of his life his theology remained what we now call Barthian and sometimes expressed itself startlingly. I always feel rather sorry for his Princess Seraphina, reluctant Presbyterian, when she has forced into her mouth the reflection, 'O, what a pit there is for sins—God's mercy, man's oblivion.'

I speak from London and as open to correction, but I feel that Scotland has hardly done justice to some aspects of Stevenson's poems in Scots, particularly where they

touch on her religion. *The Scotsman's Return from Abroad* is inimitable and should be known everywhere by heart. (Perhaps it is. I can only hope so.)

The public house, the Hielan' birks,  
And a' the bonny U.P. kirks,

and

Syne, as though a' the faith was wreckit,  
The prayer was not what I'd exspeckit,

should be as much common coin and free national interchange as 'From scenes like these' and the 'Breathes there a man?' This applies also to lines from another poem which is less of a masterpiece, for the same subject is handled with force, indeed, but without that superlative lightness of touch which so effectively sharpens the satire of the *Return*.

While thus the lave o' mankind's lost,  
O' Scotland still God mak's His boast—  
Puir Scotland, on whose barren coast  
A score or twa  
Auld wives wi' mutches an' a hoast  
Still keep His law.

How Scottish, then, was he, this wanderer, who was buried on Mount Vaea wearing the silver thistle badge of a club of sentimental exiles in the Pacific? Conservative, most serious of moralizers, sardonic, logical, grim, especially in his humour, prone to expend too recklessly in several directions talent which might have been the richer for being more narrowly restricted, enduring, even if it had to be, as he himself said, with 'broken tenacity', 'given to explaining the universe', which he pointed out to Barrie as a racial characteristic; but not, I think, touchy and disputatious as the Scot usually is, neither shackled by fear of public opinion, nor preoccupied with non-essentials, and scarcely ever stooping to sentimentalism. Not exactly

priggish, but extracting from religion a certain sensuous pleasure of horrid potentialities; not exactly humble, but capable of orgies of penitence which are, at the time, perfectly sincere. His denunciation of Burns or of Villon was no doubt directed against himself, and a passion of self-loathing may have lent added emphasis to his words. We need not inquire now whether the whirlpool of his youthful experience was, as Edmund Gosse declared, neither very dark nor very deep, or surpassed all contemporary whirlpools in darkness and depth, whether he was only one of the 'unhappy young asses' described in that very Edinburgh and rather James Bridie-ish story, *The Misadventures of John Nicholson*, or a much worse character. 'Then at the balance let's be mute.' Two things are certain; that he suffered very acutely when he was young, if for no other reason than that no young man likes to see his father make a fool of himself; and Thomas Stevenson, when he embarked on one of those Valkyrie-rides of gloom and passion in which he expressed displeasure, must have appeared foolish to a son torn between a Covenanting conscience, a sense of humour, and a respect for the personalities of others. When Bob Stevenson was forbidden by his uncle to discuss religion with his cousin, one of these scenes occurred, 'a tempest of emotion', and Louis wrote to Mrs. Sitwell that now Bob at least knew what he had to endure — 'my father on his knees and that kind of thing'. Such a hurt, which may appear transitory, may have far deeper and more disintegrating effects upon the manhood of the victim than all the blows of real tragedy or injustice, for it arises from a confounding of things great and small into tragical mirth, which may cause a permanent dislocation.

The other obvious fact is that many of the earlier writings, *Travels with a Donkey*, *An Inland Voyage*, and *The Amateur Emigrant*, are marked by a sententiousness which

is both prim and naïf; and although the literary conventions of the seventies prohibited the publication of trite indecencies, we feel that he would always have omitted them. The propriety is affirmatively evident in his handling of what orthodoxy did allow him to send into print. 'How strange', remarks the Arethusa of the *Inland Voyage*, whose Bohemianism was so very would-be, 'that we should all, in our unguarded moments, rather like to be thought a bit of a rogue with the women!' There are passages in *The Amateur Emigrant* which appear to come from the surprised pen of a young man who has never left home before and never gone out to lunch with a begrutten<sup>1</sup> face because his father has created yet another nerve-storm on discovering the purposes of that dangerous revolutionary society, the L.J.R. On board the emigrant ship, he was astonished by workmen's tales of shirking and malingering, and he was horrified to hear a 'mild, soft, domestic man' talking as though his panacea for social misery was 'to rend the old country from end to end . . . and in clamour and civil discord remodel it with the hand of violence'. This is indeed Lou, the precious, delicate, rather pious only child, never allowed out to play with rough, wild boys. Had he forgotten all the storm and violence of a few years back, or had that very storm been merely the obverse of a rigid Scots conservatism?

'Riotous, intrepid, scornful . . .' was Henley, looking at his own reflection in that mutable-as-the-sea face which he drew? Was Gower Woodseer not 'an impressionable fellow among his fellows, a philosopher only in his courted solitudes'? We ask and ask. All we know is that he suffered when he was young.

I have trod the upward and the downward slope;  
I have endured and done in days before;

<sup>1</sup> Tear-stained.

I have longed for all, and bid farewell to hope;  
And I have lived and loved, and closed the door.

But although for ever talking of himself, he never enlightened his readers much, and we can only guess, vaguely guided by a leniency displayed here or a vehemence shown there (form your own conclusion, for example, on *Father Damien*), what blackness remained behind.

To-day, the literary artist being almost dead in England while the theory-monger flourishes, I suppose Stevenson is looked upon as one of the last representatives of a stale and faded romanticism which enlivened the comfort of those generations who, according to 1937, should have prevented 1914; as a writer who never penetrates below the surface, unskilled in psychology, shallow, afraid of realism, compelled to create adventure because he was scornful of the commonplace, probably deplorably anti-scientific; a brave man condemned to an invalid's life, an industrious craftsman, but to what end? A little more decorative than a piece of bunting left over from the Jubilee of 1887, but not much worthier of serious consideration, might be the verdict of a generation who had had action by Kipling and tropic seas by Conrad or Masefield, and wars by Everyman. My generation, fast approaching the age at which Stevenson died, has seen so many times over

... the imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
Go to their graves like beds,

that we are weary, but not, surely, hardened. We have been told, time and again, that we were standing on the brink of a gulf, most exquisitely furnished with scientific apparatus, into which Western civilization would shortly disappear; we have heard our economists speaking with



the voices of prophets (I, for one, never began to grow up, politically, until *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* was published), we have witnessed the Black and Tans, and the French in the Ruhr, and every horror of peace in countries where liberty is dying. 'Life', as Stevenson remarked in his very different youth, 'is hard enough for poor mortals without having it indefinitely embittered for them by bad art.' We have suffered under bad art also, unintelligible poetry, discordant music, distorted painting. We find no rest or refuge but in a weary pacifism which needs, though we have seen much fine courage opposed to wrong, to be ever praying to be saved from bitterness. Have we anything to learn from an invalid writing in the days when England was setting out for glory in full regimentals, engrossed upon the helpful process of losing 'for every inch of ground a son'? One critic has dismissed his ideals as being those of a day or a season, not of an age; the judgement of one who would not look deeper than the pirate business and could not hear the psalm behind the laughter.

But Stevenson was no perpetual invalid, nor does his temporary reaction to tuberculosis matter at all in comparison with his essential seriousness and that sense of the 'value and high doctrinality' of suffering which is his greatest legacy to us. Like the Savage of *Brave New World*, he unflinchingly claimed 'the right to be unhappy' as the one privilege which ennobles man above brute. Nor should we forget that this characteristic made him unique among the novelists of his own day. It is no feature of the eighties, which, but for his writings, would be lost to us. It simply was not there. It was as foreign to Meredith and to James as it is to the contemporary crowd of successful novelists. There are few outstanding English writers to-day capable of crying with any reference to their art,

Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take  
And stab my spirit broad awake,  
Or, Lord, if too obdurate I,  
Choose Thou, before that spirit die . . .

And, strange as it may seem to us, who connect views on sufferings with governments and reactions to a tortured Europe, and the tragic pressure of events from without, the pressure, with Stevenson, came all from within. He lived in a safe, an all too safe political world. His philosophy was racial and individual in the extreme, the views of a Scot with a mind trained to dwell on death and judgement. What we may still value in him, however romantically expressed, is that capacity for suffering and self-discipline without which, as my generation knows, the work of a Rupert Brooke will die, while that of a Charles Sorley will never be forgotten.

Unfortunately it is the writer of *Treasure Island* whom we shall always see sitting in the front of the picture; I have to look in the background for the real Louis Stevenson.

I look, and I see a man of very rare gifts, of genius, struggling, in the teeth of a Puritan civilization and upbringing in a country where convention and fear of public opinion are terribly powerful, to be a great artist; at the mercy of those twisted racial forces which prevent the Scotsman from taking a wide vision and forbid him any placidity of soul; tempted by the additional restlessness born of his highly strung nerves and his particular disease, to make experiments in too many forms of literature, and engaging in work upon several books at a time, but finally justifying his methods in a fragmentary creation which we can never sufficiently admire; a man who suffered under the discipline of a merciless conscience but did not

upon plaintive strings  
Publish his wistfulness abroad.

I see, also, a man unhappily married; and here I wish to make quite clear that I admire Mrs. Stevenson for her courage in the face of those years of nursing almost incessant illness, and for her acceptance of long sea voyages which were pain and grief to her, although I cannot equally admire her censorship of her husband's work and friendship. Another woman might have done better; but perhaps Stevenson should never have married at all. It must be remembered that it was not the first time he had attracted a woman older than himself whose married life was unhappy. He was too fine a person to serve as merely a perpetual peg on which a woman could hang her wounded vanity and self-respect. It would have been better if the emotions of each had been those irrecoverable radiances

... that hold apart  
The promise of the golden hours,  
First love, first friendship, equal powers,  
That marry with the virgin heart.

It is tempting to think of some Archie-and-Christina idyll, and yet even that picture is not wholly satisfactory, for we know that part of the tragedy in *Weir*, unless Archie's unworldly and chivalrous devotion was to effect some deep change in his pretty minx, is that circumstances lavished the serious lover upon one who was 'a little inclined to the Cressid'. There is far less horror in his being matched against his father, an equal and worthy conflict, than in that scene on the peaceful moor when Christina carefully exploits an artistic thoughtfulness and bewitches his idealism by her studied singing of the heroic dead. These probably meant a good deal less to her than her pink silk stockings—except in moments when her Scottish capacity for emotional self-deception triumphs. 'She was a human being tuned to a sense of the tragedy of life; there

were pathos and music and a great heart in the girl . . . she saw she had gained a point, scored the impression deeper, and she had wit enough left to flee upon a victory.' And Archie-Louis might have fared the same. He was extremely unfortunate in his relations with women, his fatal power of attracting older women keeping him perpetually in false positions. When at the age of seventeen or eighteen I first read his letters, I assumed, as any adolescent would, using the measures peculiar to that period and seeing the thirties almost merged with the fifties, that Mrs. Sitwell was a rather saintly and tranquil elderly widow who, out of her experience, gave him real help and counsel. When I first learned the facts, many years later, it horrified me that our 'intense and rare' Louis should have poured out homage and devotion to a woman so near his own age, who doubtless thoroughly enjoyed being put on a pedestal by this extraordinarily gifted boy and found him an excitement and stimulant without, probably, having a tenth of that passionate longing for his ultimate salvation which afflicted his unhappy parents. There is usually something repulsive about a young man's relations with a woman slightly older than himself, and to this was added the horror of learning that Stevenson was driven to almost suicidal despair because his 'Madonna' did not sooner make clear that it was Sidney Colvin whom she was eventually to marry. I very much doubt the wisdom of publishing the selections from his correspondence with Mrs. Sitwell which were not included in the four-volume edition of the letters. If you really care for Stevenson, it can produce only a kind of sick pity to see him addressing her as 'Mother' and signing himself her son, and to read those wild cries for help, for some one to believe in him, for some one who will tell him he 'is not such cold poison to everybody' as he is to his parents. It makes reading as excruciating as the

cry from Keats: 'You think she has many faults but, for my sake, think she has not one . . . I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing. . . . Is there another life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream? There must be, we cannot be created for this sort of suffering.'

And then, as if we had not witnessed enough, witnessed more than was fitting, the scene shifts to Mentone and he proves the usual sympathetic auditor to the next of these unhappy wives, Mme Garschine appearing with vampire longing to throw her Slavonic yearnings and heart-searchings embarrassingly upon the shoulders of this exhausted boy from the savage north, whose own unhappiness was more than he could carry. 'I am very young at heart,' he wrote then, 'or (God knows) very old, and what I want is a mother.' But no 'mother' came, only this temperamental female who had found she could make little impression on more conventional young men. The confusion of values, the almost wicked displacement of normal emotions, the perpetual falsity of the female atmosphere around him, might have wrecked his art for ever, if he had lacked that secret determination and that frankness with himself which no suffering was ever to affect. One can only lament the fatal simplicity and the quixotic strain which were to lead him a third time to a woman hungering for sympathy and interest, who could enjoy seeing herself and her woes transfigured in the attentive gaze of his wonderful eyes, innocent, for the time being, of the mockery that often gleamed in them. He was the victim of the very quality in him which seemed so happily starved. 'People will take me for being cleverer than I feel,' he complained even as early as during his days of bondage at Mentone. He could say clever things, and he could say pleasant things, without any inordinate effort or inward revolution. He had talked thus when he was a child, knowing that what he said was

treasured because there was no one else to compete with Lou, to contradict or snub him; and the child in him was never to die. He loved the appreciation bestowed upon these random, effervescent words, but he only half appreciated the proprietorship added to it by his mother-friends, whose maternal attributes certainly existed only in his imagination.

In the long run, one of these unhappy wives was bound to come, see, and conquer, and the bell was tolled for Archie Weir and first love. The preference of the only child for older people, the lack of perfect adjustment to contemporaries, especially of the other sex, had exacted payment up to the last coin. There are some things in this world which defy camouflage, and one of them is that for a man of twenty-nine to marry and thereby become a step-grandfather is a happening from which it is better to turn away. Some matters would pass into speech too bitterly. Even Hamlet (to whose position as an only child, by the way, the critics have not paid much attention) once could say no more than 'Wormwood, wormwood' in an aside.

Although the ambiguous tribute of saintliness is not one which his most loyal admirers would usually dream of applying to Stevenson, I believe we may accept, in the humility of the dedication to *Weir*, a token of it. To speak of himself, engaged upon a masterpiece, as standing in need of any critic to hold

still the target higher, chary of praise  
And prodigal of counsel

is an ironic reversion to the diffidence and persevering despair of his first attempts. It was offered to one who would only partially understand, because their marriage had been prompted too largely by the treacherous persuasiveness of a common preference for the unconventional and the vagabond, while deeper sympathies were lacking.

With a being so solitary, so unrelated and unrelating, so accustomed from childhood to making his own world, marriage was sure to bring disappointment to one, and that the finer nature. Perhaps he undertook relationships and emotional adventures in some spirit of bravado, determined to explore at least the countries adjacent to those family relationships which he had been denied. In the same spirit he had insisted in boyhood on going down with the diver at Wick, although eyewitnesses tell us he was far too physically fragile for the attempt and was obviously relieved when it was safely over.

It is all very difficult. Wives of great men all remind us . . . When we consider those who had no wives, we are accustomed, for example, to find admirers shedding tears of sympathy over Lamb and his unmarried condition; whereas any one who rejects sentimentality can easily see that, even allowing for the tragic necessity which made him his sister's guardian, his was a happy life. Romantic memories of Fanny Kelly's 'divine plain face', or of that radiant young spirit of Hester Savory in its plain Quaker setting, might be no unkind substitute for belonging to the number who,

With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,  
The dreariest and the longest journey go.

It is significant that the accounts of Stevenson written by his wife and stepson present him very definitely as a person of a hot, fierce, almost overbearing spirit, fiery, rather arbitrary, rather pugnacious. Without pugnacity, he would have been no Scot; but if he behaved thus to his own household, it was doubtless because he was resolved to live up to aspects of him which had first attracted Mrs. Osbourne. Her mental picture of him was conceived with complete disregard for the diffidence and self-mistrust, the gentleness, on which other accounts of him insist. In waiting for

her and in making that fatal journey to America, he had played the part of the fearless young man alone against the Edinburgh world, the adventurer who never 'feared his fate too much', and those Stevensons had to be for ever stressed when he was being considered as a husband; from his point of view, to keep up his courage and maintain a reputation which the shrinking, protected part of him coveted, from her point of view, in order to project the qualities which she appreciated in herself into the man she had chosen. But, mercifully for Archie Weir, there were elements in him which remained elusive to the end.

Perhaps, after all, he was a good deal of the 'burgess masquerading as a Bohemian' as one critic has written, and a douce Scots girl who knew her psalms and paraphrases might well have made as good a job of marrying him as a fellow rebel, and might have blessed him with a kindlier and simpler version of 'the true pathos and sublime'.

For behind the troop of elusive phantoms, all the various Stevensons, preacher, artist, pirate, whose smiles are so mocking and not quite human, I think I can most clearly discern a young man speaking with an aloof Edinburgh accent, driving a donkey which carried what he described, in an un-English idiom, as 'the whole hypothec' of his baggage, thankful to be away from his parents, but not quite at ease when he found himself entering a French monastery.



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PRINTED IN  
GREAT BRITAIN  
AT THE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
OXFORD  
BY  
JOHN JOHNSON  
PRINTER  
TO THE  
UNIVERSITY







